Before The Rebirth of a Realm
by RoseDragonWitch

Summary

Prequel to ‘Eyes Ever Heavensward’ and ‘Hells Open, Heavens Weep’

We know of the journey that the Warrior of Light has led so far. But what about their story from the beginning? Forgetting the past could be as dangerous as losing sight of the future. Perhaps it’s time to look back and see where we came from and how far there is still to go. This is the story from the very start… before a realm was reborn.

Notes

This is the prequel to my story: Eyes Ever Heavensward and Hells Open, Heavens Weep. If you haven’t read it yet, you might want to before reading this. With the new revelations shown to us in patch 4.3 and having caught up to the current story, I decided to write here in my spare time. I will be using my own character, Claire Faye, in the story to stand in as the Warrior of Light, but feel free to think of your own characters. Here is a list of things that will be in this story: Major Game Spoilers for Final Fantasy 14: A Realm Reborn, Heavenward and Stormblood. Mostly Warrior of Light’s POV, but several others will be shown from time to time.

Death, Violence, etc. I do not own any copyright, am doing this purely for entertainment… And if there are any special requests or suggestions that you would like to see happen here, please message me and let me know. Thank you all for taking the time to read this and please let me know what you think.
The beginning of the Azure Skies and Crimson Squall series!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Hydaelyn—a vibrant planet blessed by the light of the Crystal. Amid azure seas, encompassing the westernmost of the Three Great Continents, there lies a realm embraced by gods and forged by heroes. Her name...Eorzea. Eorzean history charts the rise of a succession of great civilizations, each enjoying an age of peace — the Astral Eras. To date, all have proven ephemeral.

In the year 1572 of the Sixth and most recent Astral Era, the northern empire of Garlemald amassed a great army at the heart of Eorzea, seeking dominion over all. Rising in desperate resistance, the forces of the Eorzean Alliance met their would-be conquerors in the field. Yet even as the battle raged, the lesser moon, Dalamud, was plucked from the heavens through imperial machination. From its core emerged the elder primal Bahamut, who unleashed his fury upon the realm. The devastation brought Eorzea to its knees, and the era to its end.

Yet every end marks a new beginning.

‘That dream again…?’

‘Hear...’

Such a peaceful dream this was. Unlike anything she had ever experienced before. She was drifting through a space that was neither warm nor cold... glittering about her like she was adrift in a sea of light and darkness. She didn’t remember how she came to be here or why... it was as if she had simply come into existence at that very moment.

She slowly drifted down, continuing to float through this space without a trace of fear, feeling so safe and loved at that moment that it was impossible to fear anything at that moment. That was when she heard that voice again.

‘Hear...Feel...’

She wasn’t sure where that voice was coming from—only that it seemed to be everywhere and nowhere at once. She could tell that it was a woman’s voice that was echoing inside her very heart that spoke of pure love. Making her feel as though she was wrapped in the warmest of blankets and that no harm could ever come to her so long as she listened.

Her feet eventually touched down upon some manner of surface, though she couldn’t see anything below her but empty space. Then, without warning, she saw a brilliant light shining directly ahead of her. It glittered, and she instinctively followed, wanting to know just what it was that it was trying to tell her.

Yet she hardly took more than a few steps when the glorious light drifted closer and a horrible sound that she could not describe seemed to be draw the light in. She stopped as darkness exploded out from in front of her. Within this darkness appeared a man, in a cloak of the blackest of night, and a mask that was as red as blood. He raised his head to look at her as she glared back.

‘Hear...Feel...Think...’

The voice seemed to almost whisper to her as the ball of light floated past the cloaked man, heading straight towards her, glowing brighter as it drew closer and closer. When it reached her, the light was so luminous that she was almost blinded while she felt her strength grow. Her confidence rose so that any trace of dread left her... and her clothes... her clothes were replaced with flowing long robes, skirt, and leather boots that fit her so perfectly that it was as if they were...
made for her. She could feel a jeweled horn settled upon her brow as she held up her hand—feeling as if someone was taking her arm and showing her what she had to do. A grimoire appeared in her hands, forged from pure light as the man standing before her seemed to laugh and growl at her at the same time. She just held up her new weapon—banishing the darkness around her before the cloaked figure charged at her.

She held up her weapon, waiting for him and then... everything went white around her... and then dark.

But eventually, she heard a voice speaking through the dark.

“...Oi! Y'all right, lass?”

She screwed up her eyes, knowing that this voice was drawing her away somewhere. She didn’t want to go. She wanted to return to this to peaceful oblivion. However, she suddenly became aware that the ground beneath her feet was moving and the sounds of waves reached her ears. Curious, she opened her eyes blurrily and was looking around, blinking wearily from the bright sunlight that was shining through the windows as she gazed up to look over at who woke her up.

She rubbed her eyes before she notice the middle-aged man, dressed all in red and with a short blonde beard was standing there, looking at her with concern.

“You were moanin’ in your sleep an' sweatin’ buckets besides. Rollin' of the ship got your stomach churnin', has it?” he asked her as she blinked, trying to remember what it was that she had been dreaming about.

She didn’t answer him as she looked around again, feeling the images of the dream she had rushing away from her like the receding tides.

“Hmmm... Don't seem like seasickness, now that I look at you,” said the man as he stood back, looking satisfied that she was alright, “It'll be the aether, then, I reckon.”

That confused her and she tilted her head until he explained, “Some are more sensitive to the stuff than others, see, an' we ain't too far from Vylbrand now, which is chock-full of aetherytes. No need to fret, though. You'll soon get used to it.”

That’s right… she remembered now. She was onboard a ship bound for Eorzea. She supposed that she had grown tired from the long sea voyage that she dozed off in her seat... with the strangest dream she could remember ever having. Though as the minutes ticked by, the images and feelings that the dream brought her faded.

“I’m alright,” she reassured him in a very soft voice and a faint smile. “Tis just a dream. But thank you for your concern.”

Well, that was one good thing. But she had a strange feeling that it wasn’t the aether that was making her feel so light-headed. Just then, the ship rocked suddenly, causing her new companion to stumble, almost falling over. He quickly regained his balance as he looked up to the deck above them and grumbled angrily, “Eurgh. Might as well have been bloomin' seasickness... Ship’s leapin' around like a demented chocobo today.”

“Are you alright?” she asked.

He grumbled angrily before looking back and asked, “I reckon I might head out on deck—get meself a breath of fresh air. Limsa Lominsa's still a fair way off, in case you were wonderin'. Seein' as you're awake an' all, how's about you keep me company till we get there?”
He then looked over his shoulder to a pair of Elezen youths, looking no older than fifteen or sixteen resting there. At a glance, the two of them could only be twins with how alike they were, from their rosy cheeks to their long ears and upturn noses, and even to their long snow-white hair tied back in similar fashion. The only difference between the two were the different colored ribbons that they used to tie their hair back and how one of them seemed to be wearing a bright shade of lipstick.

“Them young'uns don't much care for conversation, see,” the man said to her as she gazed back up at him, “An' road, Brennan's the name, an' peddlin's me trade.”

“I'll be happy to join you, Brennan,” she answered him politely and she got up, feeling that she could use some fresh air after being stuck in this cabin since their brief stop in Sharlayan. The pair of them cross the cabin and Brennan bowed her out the door like a gentleman before she felt the salty spray of the Rhotano Sea upon her face.

“Ah, smell that salty sea breeze!” he sighed happily as he stretched out, and then turned his head to look her up and down.

“Now then, lass, judgin' by your unusual garments, I'd say you were one of them new adventurers. Am I warm?” he asked and she smiled.

Was it that obvious?

She supposed so when she looked down at herself. The strange clothes with the many buckles and belts, a tiny bag with only a few precious gil, and a weathered and battered grimoire sitting at her hip. She supposed that she stood out like a sore thumb to everyone else on board.

Seeing no point in lying, she nodded and Brennan grinned as he said loudly, “I knew it! Goin' wherever the wind blows, seekin' fortune an' glory—now that's what I call livin'! So long as you can avoid dyin', I mean,” he then quickly added, “Ain't no secret that adventurin's a risky business—these days especially. What was it that first attracted you to it?”

“Ah…” she began before falling silent.

She wasn’t entirely sure how to answer him. Her reasons were her own…

She knew that most would choose things like… to admass a fortune… to gain power… or win glory. She wasn’t looking for any of those things. She supposed that the only way she could answer was that once she mustered up the courage to set out, she left her home behind and only took what she could carry… which wasn’t much.

“Well, if you ain't inclined to tell, I ain't about to pry,” Brennan said casually, misinterpreting her silence, “Might be as ol' Brennan's a chatterbox, but he sure as hells ain't no busybody. We all have a secret or three, don't we? Me? Dozens. An' I'd rather they stayed secret, too—which is why I don't go stickin' me nose where it ain't welcome.”

She chuckled, liking this stranger more and more the more he talked.

“Just remember, though: there're more important things than fortune an' glory. Such as breathin'. Ain't no profit in bein' dead, an' that's a fact,” he advised sagely. No sooner did she nod in agreement when some kind of warning bell began to sound, causing all the passengers around them to stop whatever they were doing and were looking around with frightened expressions.

That was when she saw something from the slight fog and she held up a hand in warning calling out, “Look out!”
Brennan looked behind him just as something fired upon the ship, shaking it and knocking the startled man on the deck. He let out a startled scream as he landed hard on his back and she covered her face, having gotten a face-full of stinging saltwater.

“Ships off the starboard bow! Pirate colors!” one of the shipmen cried out.

Brennan crawled to a part of the ship that had more cover and crouched down as the passengers fled below deck and the crew began to work the sails and rudder furiously, trying to catch the wind and escape.

She bent down to check on Brennan, glad to see that he looked unharmed, though shaken.

“Pirates? Bloody hells...” he cursed before a shipman spotted them.

“Have ye no sense!??” he barked at them, “Get below!”

The pair nodded, getting up and making their way back to the cabin to wait it out. They were the last two to make it to the cabin, surrounded by the rest of the passengers, nearly all of whom were scared and huddled together. Brennan still seemed a bit shook up, but had calmed down somewhat now that they were out of the open.

“What is the world comin’ to...?” he growled out harshly, “Pirates firin' on a ship flyin' Lominsan colors! Bastards either have a boatload of balls, or bugger all for brains.”

“Stay calm,” she told him said evenly.

Not much point in getting upset now. There wasn’t much they could do unless he wanted to swim over to those ships and start fighting.

Thankfully, no sooner had she tried to get him to relax when the captain of the ship come bursting into the room, a rather smug smile on his face as he called to them all, “Ye can rest easy, friends! We've made it out o' cannon range, an' no buccaneer's bark'll catch this flighty temptress once the wind's in her sails.”

Sighs of relief rang out through the room, and shaky smiles were returning to everyone’s faces at the thought of being safe. That was when Brennan turned back to her with a smile back on his face.

“That was too bleedin' close…” he said. “Glad one of us kept his head on his shoulders—I reckon I'd've lost mine, otherwise.”

She smiled back. “I did nothing,” she said modestly. “But I am glad that you are alright.”

“If them pirates gave up the chase, we must be close to port,” Brennan added in realization, leading her out, “Let's head up on deck an' have us a look, shall we?”

The two of them walked out to the front of the ship, overlooking the water, to where they could just see the faint outlines of land appearing on the horizon. Her nose was filled with the scent of salt and seaweed while the sun had come out from behind some clouds and warmed her face as she wondered more about what this city by the sea looked like.

“By the by, is this your first trip to Limsa Lominsa?” Brennan asked her suddenly and Claire nodded, growing more curious about their destination with every passing second.

“It is!” Brennan asked delightfully, having to speak a little louder over the call of the gulls. “Well then, let this journeyed itinerant tell you the ins an' outs of your destination. Ahem!” He then
cleared his throat and started to explain in a more professional manner, “Limsa Lominsa prides itself on bein' Eorzea's foremost naval power. Weren't too long ago that the place was ruled by pirates, but thanks to the current Admiral's civilizin' influence, the city-state could almost pass for a respectable nation. You'd never guess she was once a rum-swillin' buccaneer herself! Heh heh!”

Interesting. This Admiral would have to be tough if she was in charge of managing a nation of cutthroats and curs. She wondered if she would get the chance to meet her in person?

“Course, most folk ain't so quick to change, an' with a town full of liberty-lovin' ruffians, you can imagine how many naysayers an' troublemakers she's got to deal with—like them pirates who took a fancy to us just now,” Brennan warned, “An' if that weren't bad enough, I've heard the Sahagin are raidin' the coast just as bold as you please.”

Perhaps he had seen the confusion in her face when he mentioned these ‘Sahagin’ and he explained, ‘Them're the sea-dwellin' beastmen the locals call "fishbacks," 'case you didn't know.”

Fish-like beastmen? Now she was curious to know what kind of creatures they were?

“Ah, at long last. Land ho!” Brennan called out cheerfully as he waved, as if there was somebody waiting for him at shore, “Behold Limsa Lominsa, a nation blessed by the ocean's bounty an' beloved of Llymlaen, goddess of navigation.”

She looked back quickly, eager to get a good look of things. Nestled high on the stony cliffs, like seagull nests, were a series of buildings carved into the stone, connected by wooden bridges and walkways that stretched between the cliffs like a series of spider webs. All along the paths she could see a mixture of people walking about, doing their shopping, stopping to chat with each other… and even some who seemed to be tipsy as they waved bottles around.

All in all, it looked very much like a place where you would expect pirates to live.

The ship pulled up towards the docks and they went below deck to go ashore, not saying much but fully eager to be back on dry land. When the doors opened up for them, she couldn’t help but stare around with fascination; having never been to a place before in her life. Chuckling a little at the look of amazement on her face, Brennan appeared at her side.

“An' here's where we part ways, lass,” he told her as the rest of the passengers disembarked around them. “I'm off to the markets to deliver me wares, then it's on to the highroad for me.”

He shuffled around in one of the many pouches at his belt and pulled out a very simple, silver band and held it out to her. “Here, I want you to have this—by way of thanks for savin' me arse earlier.”

This surprised her, for as far as she was aware, she didn’t do anything worthy of a gift. But he looked so genuine in his expression that she couldn’t help but hold out her hands and he dropped the gift into her palms.

“Thank you,” she said, truly grateful. Normally, she would refuse such trinkets… but the truth was that she had hardly anything else with her. Nothing but the clothes on her back, a small money pouch that had a sad clink of a few gil… and she would be needing a new weapon soon.

She would hopefully find a way to repay him someday as Brennan shook her hand.

“Hey—you never did tell me your name, did you?” Brennan said suddenly, “Well, here's an idea... Become the sort of storied personage I can brag about havin' met, an' I'll consider us square.”

She actually laughed a little at that and informed him, “Sounds fair. But to make sure that you
know it’s me, it’s Claire. My name is Claire Faye.”

Brennan smiled kindly at her and bowed a little before he turned and headed off onto the docks as the new Adventurer looked around at the city with bright interest, wondering just where she should begin with her new journey.
Lurkers of the Grotto

Chapter Summary

After arriving in Limsa in one piece, a new adventurer is ready to start her journey by the ocean... by going to a farm?

Claire waved her new off as he headed to the markets for his wares. Once he was out of her sights, she turned her full attention to the city itself. She could not remember ever seeing a town such as this, and suddenly wished that she had eyes in the back of her head so that she could look at everything at once. She heard the din of the people walking around her, not giving her even the briefest of glances as she made her way through the town.

Where was one even to begin?

She left the docks behind and traveled upwards to where most of the people around here were gathering. This appeared to be the square of the town, at least judging from the spinning crystal that stood proudly before her. She looked around, unsure of where it was that she wanted to go first.

“Hey! You there!” barked a voice and she jumped slightly before glancing over to see a man dressed in a bright yellow jacket looking at her. “Aye, I mean you,” he added when he saw her looking at him he nodded, “This is my district, and I make it my business to know all the scum that washes up in it. Ah, an adventurer fresh off the boat, is it? Well then... Allow one of Limsa Lominsa's finest to set you on the right path. Hop to it, lass, I haven't got all day!”

Worried that she had done something wrong, she went over to him, put apparently he didn’t mean to tell her off. He instead stated how he noticed her lost expression and mentioned that all new adventurers are required to register their presence in the city. He finished by mentioning that she was to go over to the Drowning Wench and enroll with the Adventurers’ Guild and to speak with a man by the name of Baderon. After that, he gave her a push on her way, sending her off in the direction of Bulwark Hall, to where she rode an elevator to the upper decks.

The Drowning Wench was a rather dark and dreary place—as depressing as its name. She couldn’t see why this would be a place where adventurers would sign up to join the adventurer’s guild... still, she held such thoughts back as she looked around, wondering where this Baderon character was.

That was when she spotted a man behind a counter, looking over some sort of a book and decided that he would be the best sort to ask.

“Greetin's to ye, lass. What'll it be?” he sked brightly when she approached. Before she could even explain her situation, it seemed that he already had a guess. Perhaps she should consider getting some new clothes while she was here if she looked so out of place?

“...Ah, but you ain't 'ere fer the drink, are ye!? Ye've come with a mind to try yer 'and at 'venturin', I reckon!” he laughed and she nodded in agreement as he grinned back. “Well, ye'll find no shortage o' work 'ere in Limsa. So what do they call y— Nay, don't tell me. 'Tis on the tip o' me tongue... 'Tis...’tis...’tis bloody gone is what it is. Bollocks.”
She wasn’t sure if she should laugh or not as he seemed generally frustrated with his own memory.

“They say this forgetfulness is some lingerin’ effect o’ the Calamity. I say it's a Leviathan-sized pain in the arse,” he said, finally giving up on trying to get his brain to work properly. But he seemed to realize that he was talking gibberish right now and added, “Ah, but where are me manners? The name's Baderon, an' this most 'ospitable of 'ostelries is the Drownin' Wench. Tis also the 'ome o' the 'Venturers' Guild, 'ere in Limsa. That's why we've got a desk 'pecially fer 'andlin' guild business — an' why I seem to spend more time savin' the necks o' wholeg like yerself than wettin' the throats o' me regulars.”

Really? She wondered what kind of life this Baderon had for himself. She was suddenly curious about him.

“'Venturers 'ave a knack fer findin' trouble, see,” he added, “Not that they need it in these parts, on account o' there bein' trouble wherever ye look. If ye manage to steer clear o' the fishbacks an' the kobolds outside the city, the pirates on the inside will get ye instead. An' if they don't manage, there's always the Garlean Empire to finish the job. Oh, no one knows what they're plannin', o' course...but if they're plannin' anythin', ye can be sure it's to kill the lot of us. Aye...this town seems peaceful at a glance, but look again, an' ye'll see a people livin' in fear o' what tomorrow might bring.”

He said all of this very fast, and she had a very hard time trying to understand what he was saying with that sea-faring accent of his. She knew that these ‘fishbacks’ he mentioned were the Sahagin… though she only knew that thanks to Brennan. The rest… was as if another language to her. Leviathan? Kobolds? Just what were they supposed to be?

But she understood the basics of what he was trying to get across. There were no shortage of work for Adventurers in town and that this was where it all began.

“...An' who can blame ‘em, after everythin' that's 'appened? Eorzea took a mighty blow durin' the Calamity, but our 'omes weren't the only things what got wiped off the face of existence by that thrice-damned bastard of a dragon,” Baderon went on grumpily, “It took our bleedin' memories, too. An' no one's been able to explain it in a way as makes an onze o’ sense. None o' the folks what saw it an' lived to tell the tale seem to agree on 'ow the tale actually goes. 'Tis all foggy...like recollections from an 'ard night on the ale.”

She had heard of that—tales having reached her from across the sea. She had thought that they be mere rumors, but it appeared that they truly could not remember the heroes who once saved this land. Why would that be? What sort of magic could be so powerful as to wipe someone from another’s memory? Aside from ale?

“Ye can imagine why people might fear fer the future if they can't rightly recall the past. But there is one thing we all remember, an' that's the group o' 'venturers what laid down their lives to drag Eorzea back from the brink, when she was bound fer the abyss,” Baderon added with a tone that held nothing but respect—and a hint of awe, “Well, I say we remember... Truth is, though we ain't forgotten what they did fer us, this godsdamned Calamity-spawned memory loss robbed us o' their names..."

He sighed grimly before finishing, “It won't even let us picture their damn faces. 'Tis like starin' at a gull flyin' in front o' the sun — all ye see in yer mind's eye is a shadow set against a blindin' glare.”

Claire could now picture such a thing… a group of powerful beings standing before a brilliant light and with them being unable to even see their faces. What sort of people would be considered
saviors of the realm?

“An’ that's 'ow every bugger describes it, by the way...give or take the odd gull,” Baderon informed her. “It's this what's got people callin' these 'eroses the “Warriors o' Light.”’

Such a heavy title. She wasn’t sure she ever would feel comfortable with something like that, but the idea of it certainly sounded exciting.

“If Limsa's ever goin’ to put this time o' darkness behind it, it's goin' to need 'venturers to 'elp banish the fear,” he confirmed for her and she nodded in agreement, “It's goin' to need new 'eroses like the ones we lost. Maybe one day ye'll be one of 'em. An' that's why any aid we can give to a 'venturer is effort well spent. What say ye, lass? Ye willin' to lend us yer strength?”

She only grinned and that seemed to be enough for him and he burst out laughing.

“Me thanks to ye, an' to the Navigator an' all!” he told her, “I knew She'd steered ye my way fer a reason.”

She chuckled, liking this guy even if she barely understood a word he said.

“Ah, but listen to me, yatterin' on like a sun-touched fishwife,” he chuckled, realizing that he hadn’t let her get a word in. He back as he turned a page over in the book in front of him and held it out along with a pen, “‘Tis 'igh time we got yer mark in me book. Put yer scrawl right there.”

She took the pen and wrote her name in a loopy script, feeling a strange thrill inside at the sight of her name marked there. Baderon looked over the name and nodded.

“Claire Faye, is it? An' a fine name it is,” he said. Truly? She had been teased a lot for that strange name. But he took it all in strive as he finished, “Congratulations. Yer now an upstandin' member o' the 'Venturers' Guild.”

And so now it officially begins. Her journey starts now and she had a feeling that it was going to be an exciting one.

However, before she could open her mouth to say a word; something threated to crush those happy feelings.

“You there—adventurer!” barked a voice, causing her to look back to the suspicious voice. What she saw were a handful of men dressed in the same yellow uniform that she had seen from the center of town. She did not like the way they were observing her, however—like they were expecting her to attack them for no reason? They walked in closer to her, towering over her.

Now what?

“You sailed in on the last ferry, did you not?” the man asked briskly, and without even waiting for her to answer, he wen on, “The captain reported being attacked by a pirate vessel. And several witnesses have testified independently that a passenger matching your description went out on deck mere moments before the incident took place. Sending your friends signals, were you?”

She blinked, started by that.

No, why would they say such things? She only just arrived in town and she was being questioned like a criminal? She was on the verge of telling them to find a man by the name of Brennan in the markets to speak for her… when suddenly…?
“Now 'old on a just a moment there, officer,” Baderon spoke up quickly, “Ye've got the wrong lass. This fine, upstandin' young lady is me dear departed grandma's sister's niece's cousin's closest companion. The lass wouldn't be caught dead fraternizin' with such unsavory elements.”

His dear departed grandma’s sister’s niece’s cousin’s closet companion? Still, as unlikely as that was, he sounded so sure of it that she almost believed him, to be honest. She only nodded, quickly explaining that she had never even been to Limsa before today. She only went up deck for some air before the pirates attacked. And she was far from the only person up on deck at that moment. She had just finished signing her name down here in the adventurer’s guild and was planning to ask for advice… for she knew next to nothing about this city.

The men were looking startled by all of this, but their seemed to think it over.

“…Is that right?” he asked before clearing his voice and adding to Baderon, “...Is that right? Ahem. You are surely aware of the recent kidnappings? Respectfully, then, we cannot be too trusting of outsiders at a time when the loyalty of even our closest friends is in doubt.”

“Aye, ye make a good point there, officer, a very good point,” Baderon agreed, “Very wise. Ye needn't worry, though — I keep one eye open at all times, me, an' two more often than not. Now, sir, what say ye to a tankard o' me finest ale afore ye return to yer duties, eh?”

At that, the Yellowjacket began to laugh and asked much more good-naturedly, “Not a watered-down cup of piss like last time, I should hope?”

Baderon gave him an innocent expression that she did not buy for a moment as he said, “Ain't got the faintest idea what yer on about, officer. The Wench might offer some o' the cheapest grog this side o' the Strait o' Merlthor, but that don't mean it won't get ye good an' pickled! An' look, there's a chair over there just cryin' out to be sat on, so kick off them 'eavy boots, eh?!”

The men laughed as they waved him off, acting like old friends. Regardless of him running a bar, it seemed that Baderon commanded some level of respect in town.

“Thank you,” she said to him as he waved her gratitude away.

“Ye'll 'ave to excuse these eager bloody Yellowjackets,” he told her, “There's been a spate o' kidnappin's, see, an' they ain't got a clue who's behind 'em. Naturally, they've taken to clappin’ irons on anyone who looks vaguely suspicious, which means 'venturers, visitors...an' pretty much every bugger else in this town.”

Oh, so that was the reason. She supposed she could understand that, even if she didn’t like it. And it seemed that this place was a lot more dangerous than she first thought. She made a note to keep herself out of trouble and nodded.

“Don't take it personal, though,” Baderon finished up, “Us Lominsans can be an 'eadstrong bunch o' bastards, 'tis true, but given time, we'll grow on ye. Now, where was I...? Oh aye!” he cried when he remembered and then opened his arms wide and said with a big grin, “Welcome to Limsa Lominsa, where the sea's as green as the faces o' me patrons after a few too many Blackbelly whiskeys! Now, take a moment to gather yer wits, an' we'll get started with learnin' ye the ways o' the city.”

She nodded as she reached into her pocket and pulled out the ring that Brennan gave her and fitted upon her finger. Knowing that this would be her first step towards her journey and was going to need all the help she could get.
She only hoped it was going to be a good ride.

Baderon was more than patient with her, explaining things about Limsa, and offered for her to first get a feel of the city. He told her attune to all the aetheryte crystals, devices that can move her from one location to another in a blink of an eye, as well as check out the marketplace, where he predicted that she would be spending a lot of time… not at the moment though, seeing how she barely had any gil with her. And finally, he instructed her to go and check out some of the guilds that they have in Limsa. Since she had a grimoire with her, he told her that her best bet would be to join the Arcanist Guild, who would be more than happy to teach her some tricks.

But Baderon was also very adamant that she complete these tasks before she even thought to accept any work from anyone else. She decided to take his words to heart, afraid that if she didn’t, they she would become overwhelmed. She took her time looking around the city, getting the lay of the land, and actually enjoying her first time to this world by the ocean. She spent the rest of the day running about, locating each of the aetherymes she could find and experimenting with that. She loved the markets, exploring everything that they had to sell, from armor and robes to accessories, food to keep up strength, medicines and materials for crafting, even a series of dyes for her clothes.

But having to save every gil she had, she instead focused on heading down to Mealvaan’s Gate, to where she meet the Arcanists. They were the scholarly type, and were more than happy to take her in and teach her in the art of arcane geometries—able to use intricate patterns that map the unlocked mysteries of existence—and learn to draw forth and manipulate the body’s aetheric energies.

In truth, Claire had a rudimentary understanding of the craft that she looked over before coming to these shores—though she only knew one spell. Ruin.

But when she saw a fellow guild member summon out a bright blue creature with a ruby jewel upon its forehead, she knew that she wanted to learn everything as quickly as possible.

They gave her the first task in asking her to slay a handful of pests that lurk just outside the city—where she strayed out. She didn’t go far, finding the creatures she needed almost right away and took care of them before quickly returning to the main city… fearing that she was not quite ready to head out until she knew more of where she was going.

Still, with that last item checked off her list of things to do, she decided to head back to the Drowning Wench, a little taken aback by how dark things got so suddenly. She supposed that she was so focused on everything set before her that she didn’t realize how late that things were going.

She was a little worried that Baderon would have gone to bed at this point, but he was still up and wide-eye… if a little crossed-eye, when she returned.

“Ah, there ye are, Claire,” he welcomed her back, “Enjoy yer jaunt ‘round the city, did ye? If ye mean to base yerself in Limsa Lominsa, that won’t be the last time ye’ll visit them three places. An' now ye've got some idea o' what's where, ye can start explorin' the rest o' the town. Ye've shown a good ear fer listenin', lass. Stick with ol’ Baderon, an' ye'll go far.”

Which she did. She spent the next couple of days in Limsa, running through the city, accepting aid from anyone who asked. They were fairly simple—mostly deliveries and pest control. Soon enough she earned her first pieces of gil. Not much, but she was able to buy a couple of accessories and some potion bottles.

Slowly venturing out farther beyond these walls with each passing day.
She dropped in on Baderon from time to time, who seemed to enjoy her progress, and that was when she asked him more of what the lands around here were like. He seemed to think that she was ready to leave the safety of the town and nodded in agreement, informing her to start things off by visiting an orchard called Summerfold Farms, where the owner was an old friend of his. He even was kind enough to give her a recommendation to give to Staelwyrn, telling him to give her work and that she was sure to impress him.

So it was early morning, just before the sun was up, did she find herself standing on the outside of Zephyr Gate… leading out to a place called Middle La Noscea. She was nervous, but also excited, before she went charging outside.

She was met with rivers and wide open plains of grass and rocks, having to slide down the rolling hills and able to see the bright, clear-blue ocean off in the distance. She pulled out her grimoire and began to test it out on a few simple creatures that she passed… rats, lady bugs… a few mad lambs…? She felt guilty about those last ones.

But all in all, with every step she took, the more confident that she grew. She went skipping on ahead, tending to stick to the road and avoid some of the larger creatures that lurked around this area. She still remembered Bennan’s words… staying alive. Not much profit in being dead. She would have to be careful until she grew stronger to deal with any creature.

But after following her new map, she found herself heading to a small orchard and farming land, just as how Baderon described. After speaking with some of the workers, they pointed out their leader, Staelwyrn, who seemed to be waiting for her.

“Ah, you must be the adventurer Baderon promised to send along. Claire Faye, wasn't it?” he asked her when she stood in front of him. And when she nodded, he seemed impressed with this. “You honored his word, so that's a good start. I'm Staelwyrn, the “old bastard,” as Baderon likely described me, and this here is my humble orchard.”

Claire had to fight the smile—knowing that Baderon had used those exact words to describe him. They must have been old friends indeed if they knew each other this well. And, perhaps, explain why Baderon seemed so worried for him.

Staelwyrn took a deep breath before he informed her a little more about Summerford Farms. He explained that most who worked here with him were once pirates, but once the Calamity destroyed their ship, they had no other place to go. At least until the Admiral gave them work here in the fields—a new start and an offer they couldn’t refuse. But with them being sea-dwellers for most of their lives, none of them had much experience in farming and so they needed help.

Which was when Staelwyrn had something surprising to add.

“I've a mind to set you a task, Faye, but before I do, I need to be sure you're properly kitted out,” he said to her, “Pirates don't care to parley with dandies, you understand. It might well be that the ones here have traded in their cutlasses for coulters, but they're still rogues at heart. I know a solid set of gear when I see it. Come back when you think you're more suitably equipped.”

She looked down at her clothes, wondering if there was something wrong as he looked her up and down before shaking his head.

“No, no, lass,” he said firmly, “I fear I can't give you work lookin' like that. It's not about just handlin' yourself in combat. You want to dress in such a way as to terrorize your foes, causin' them to regret challengin' you in the first place.”
She was rather put out by that, but she supposed she could see his point. He pushed her off and she went back to testing out her new abilities with the arcane before deciding to return to the city and see what else they had to teach her. She was thrilled the first time that they taught her how to summon her own carbuncles and she had fallen in love with it as soon as it jumped up to her, happily rubbing its face against her hand and chirping in excitement when it jumped into her arms.

“Carbuncles are nothing more concentrated aether,” they explained to her. “They are just as alive as you or me… each one with their own personality which is distinct and yet similar.”

But with the success of her task… where she was to inspect some crates, she gained a greater understanding of her Emerald Carbuncle. She still had far to go, but she was so proud when she later returned to the guild and was gifted with a long, navy-blue robe for her. Combining that with the clothes that she had earned from her many different quests, she couldn’t help but feel much more protected and ready for combat. Once she had everything she felt she needed, she returned to Staelwyrn, who looked impressed with her.

“Oho! As long as you're this well covered, I won't feel any guilt throwin' you to the sharks,” he laughed, “Erstwhile buccaneers are an ornery lot. They rage in love for the sea, and care little for the laws of the land. But they respect strength, and by the looks of you, I'd say you'll have little trouble gettin' their attention.”

She hoped so. In truth, she didn’t feel that intimidating… but if he believed so…?

Instead, she merely nodded, wanting to hear more of this ‘task’ that he had for her.

“Ah, Faye,” he said, after taking another long look at her, “That aura of confidence tells me you've not been idle since last we met. I hope I've read you aright, for I've a task that requires the attention of a capable adventurer. Might that adventurer be you?”

She nodded, wanting to get to work.

“Good to hear,” he laughed before he turned grim and explained all business-like, “Then I shall lay before you the sorry tale. You will have heard rumors of the abductions. Aye, citizens have been disappearin' from every corner of Limsa Lominsa, as if plucked from the face of Hydaelyn, boots and all, by an unseen hand.”

Yes, she was aware of that, having heard whispers all throughout the city. But as far as she knew, most of the kidnappings had been taken place inside the city—usually striking against those who stayed out too late or gotten lost on their way home. She couldn’t see why Summerford Farms was…?

“And what's this got to do with Summerford Farms, you might ask,” he asked her, answering her unspoken question, “Well, that remains to be seen, but it seems a collection of right unsavory fellows with azure-tattooed faces has been creepin' up to the edges of the fields and spyin' on my yeomen. Now, I doubt anyone would enjoy bein' scrutinized by such savages at the best of times, but the farmhands are convinced that they're the kidnappers of rumor, come for their hides.”

She could see where he was going with this. In simple terms, he was worried that one of his own would be next to ‘vanish’.

“Needless to say, they're beside 'emselves with worry, and their work's sufferin' for it — which is the very last thing I need when my old crewmen are still gettin' used to their new jobs,” he finished with a rather helpless shrug, “‘Tis a struggle to get 'em to leave the farmhouse of a mornin'. That is, as they say, where you come in. Would you be willin' to investigate these tattooed thugs for me?”
She did not know what she could that could ease his worries, but if it would help put their minds at ease, she was glad to help. She nodded and he gave her a grateful grin before he suggested that she go and investigate a place called Seasong Grotto, where the rumors said that some unwelcomed visitors were occupying the place lately.

“Be careful, though, Faye,” he warned as he saw her off, “I couldn't say for sure what manner of miscreants we're dealin' with here. If they are the kidnappers...well, just be on your guard, all right?”

She nodded, not planning to find herself the one kidnapped today as she began to head her way down through the plains, heading to a place where he had marked on her map. She arrived in no time at all, having to fight only a few creatures who came sniffing too close to her, but otherwise she didn’t have a hair out of place by the time that she reached the cave-like area.

She looked around the small grotto where, aside from some strange yellow ball-like creatures floating about in the air, she didn’t see anything out of the ordinary in this place. The only thing that was here was a statue set up in the very center of the cave… where there were words carved into the stone.

Claire approached it curiously and began to study the stone—wondering if this was some sort of memorial site or something.

“I am the waves that bear…” she began in a whisper as she read the stone.

“I am the waves that bear,” said another voice from behind, causing her to turn around immediately. She wasn’t alone anymore it would seem. A mi’qote woman was standing before her, with short snow-white hair that was tied in metal bands in front of her face and a matching white top and a strange contraption hanging about her neck. She gazed onwards with bright turquoise colored eyes that almost seemed to glow in the dark, and as she arched a graceful neck, Claire could see strange purple tattoos on either side of her neck.

She went on speaking as she recounted what was written upon the stone.

“I am the winds that guide,” she recited, “I am the evening stars. I am the morning sky. I am born of the sea. And there shall I die.”

She then looked back at her with a hint of a smile as she explained, “Thus reads the sailors' requiem carved into yonder stone. Such words well describe the manner in which the citizens of Limsa Lominsa live their lives. It is both a litany against misfortune for those out on the waves...” she then approached a little closer and finished, “...and a prayer that the souls of those who perish on land might find their way back to the sea.”

Claire observed at her suspiciously as the mi’qote seemed to be doing the same before her bright turquoise eyes widened in recognition.

“Ah, you are the adventurer I’ve seen around Summerford Farms,” she said with a smile, “I thought myself on the trail of the kidnappers, but it would seem I have missed my mark.”

Perhaps. But Claire still made a note to mention her when she returned to Staelwyrm when she returned. Before she could ask her name though, she heard a distinctive howl and the ground beneath them began to shake and before she knew it, something came crashing from the lone exit.

Both of them turned at once to see what was causing this anguished holler of pain to see a goobbue —larger than most—come barreling in towards them.
“...Or perhaps not,” the mi’qote stated causally, as Claire moved sideways, recognizing a fight at this point. Meanwhile, the mi’qote went on speaking as if nothing was wrong and she was observing the goobbue as if it were part of the sailors’ requiem in the stone.

“As I suspected, the aetheric disturbance here is no natural occurrence. Nor is it a coincidence that the two of us should come here in search of those responsible for the disappearances only to be attacked. But who stands to benefit from the keeping of this secret?” she asked and Claire really wanted to hit her for wondering such a thing at such a time. Thankfully, the wandering scholar seemed to realize that now was hardly the time to ponder such things and added, “Such thoughts must wait. Let us attend to the task at hand, unpleasant though it be.”

Claire flipped open her new grimoire and called for her Emerald Carbuncle, which appeared with a screech and a ball of light at her feet—and charged ahead of her as she cast her spell of bio. The mi’qote next to her reached for the flowering wand at her belt began to cast spell, causing the very earth to fly up and crash into the goobbue as it roared and swiped its long arms at them.

“I sense something awry with this creature. Be on your guard,” the cultured conjurer warned before pointing behind the goobbue, “Ware! The disruption of the aether draws others to the fray!”

At one point the goobbue slashed at her, and she felt her side stinging painfully... at least until a warm, gentleness entered through the wound and the pain disappeared. Looking back, she realized that this mi’qote was the one responsible... having healed the wound.

So, she was a healer? Her spells seemed more powerful than her own single healing spell and was glad to have help. Meanwhile, she tested out her new learned skills on the goobbue, finding herself able to remain surprising calm as she moved about the lumbering creature as it was now roaring out with both pain and anger. It’s cries soon attacked others... none of the good kind either.

“Keep your focus on the battle! Leave the tending of wounds to me,” the cultured conjurer asked before more creatures were being drawn to the battle.

A group of goobbues came marching down to join it in battle, where she heard the mi’qote call out to her, “More unwelcome visitors? Slay them quickly lest we be overwhelmed.”

Easy for her to say so. But still, they came to a kind of rhythm. Claire moved about light on her feet while she dealt most of the damage, leaving the mi’qote to heal her every so often. The other creatures were nowhere near as stubborn as the first goobbue and fell quickly enough. Once she brought the rest of its mates down, the largest goobue seemed to sense that she was the bigger threat and charged at her. Claire was able to avoid its swinging arms and giant mouth as they pressed the attack until the poor thing fell.

“Mayhap we are overmatched...” the conjurer said sadly, looking at the creature.

Tired, but pleased with how it worked out, Claire placed her grimoire back to her side while her carbuncle vanished with a shriek and a ball of light.

Yet, just as she was about to speak to the conjurer, she felt a faint pulsating sound and saw something glinting out of the corner of her eyes. Looking over it, she spotted what looked to be a crystal of the brightest shade of blue simply laying on the stone. Curious, she went over to examine it... where did it come from? She sure didn’t remember seeing it when she first arrived.

As she made to pick it up, she saw how it began to glow brightly and she took a step back when it floated upwards. It actually lifted itself off the floor and into the air, emitting a powerful light as it came to her... settling right above her heart. The light around her grew only stronger until it was
blinding and before she knew what was happening, she felt herself falling back into dark.

She opened her eyes to find that she was drifting in a dark expanse that glowed faintly about her with a distant light. She looked around, trying to focus her clouded min to figure out what was happening. That was when she realized that instead of drifting… she was standing upon a strange sigil. She had never seen it’s like before… strangely resembling something she may have seen in her grimoire but certain that it was not arcane. As she examined it, she realized that the intricate patterns glowed save for several circles intertwined with them that were circling the edge. The blue crystal that she picked up before… which was as if she was holding a piece of the ocean in her very hands settled into one of these circles like it always belonged there.

Before her eyes, a burst of blue light erupted into a beam, shining straight upwards and exploding like a sparkler before gentle specks fell about her like leaves in autumn.

The light grew radiant again, searing her eyes, and when her vision returned a second time, she was standing in a great space, above her a glowing red-gold light bright as the sun, surrounded by clouds and raining bright lights like meteorites.

What was going on? She didn’t understand. As she stared around for answers, she heard it again.

A voice so warm and caring that it was as if she was being embraced by someone who loved her with all their hearts.

'Hear… Feel… Think…'

She heard that voice before… but where? She couldn’t think straight and her mind began to spin as she tried to remember something as if she had seen it in a dream from long ago. But soon she found herself paying more attention to the present and began staring around her, longing to find the source of that voice; but could not find it before she saw something drifting up towards her.

As she looked, through the hazy light she saw what was none other than an enormous slab of crystal, as large as she was; gently floating up through space and close to her. And when the voice spoke again, it seemed to come from this very crystal.

'Crystal bearer…’ the voice said in that beautiful voice once more and she felt her very heart grow warm at the sounds of it. “I am Hydaelyn. All made one. A Light there once was that shone throughout this realm… yet it hath since grown dim. And as it hath faltered, so hath Darkness risen up in its stead, presaging an end to Life. For the sake of all, I beseech thee: deliver us from this fate!’

Deliver?

“I don’t understand…” she whispered before she watched in awe when more crystals began to join the first, spinning and spiraling away from her, sinking and rising through this sea of expanse.

'The power to banish the Darkness dwelleth in the Crystals of Light. Journey forth and lay claim to them.’

As she spoke, a final crystal rose amidst the smaller ones spiraling into the dim expanse – this one massive, bigger than any she’d ever seen, so great that it could dwarf even the tallest of mountains —and outshine the sun with its glowing in its brilliant light.

Claire only watched with wide eyes, her amazement growing with every second that passed until she was nothing more than a tiny speck in this vast ocean of nothingness. Beautiful didn’t even begin to describe what she was seeing. As if she was before a massive diamond, with billions upon
billions of shining faucets that revealed a rainbow light that sparkled from every mirrored surface.

She only craved to hear that voice again, like a loving mother soothing her child after a terrible nightmare.

‘By thy deeds shall the Crystals reveal themselves to thee,’ the infinitely loving voice said to her again, ‘Only believe, for the Light liveth in thy heart.’

Claire saw something out of the corner of her eyes which seemed to break whatever spell that held her bound by the light of the crystal, and realized that she wasn’t alone here. There were other beings, people, drifting towards the crystal, some of them soaring about it like birds, while others drifted like fish in the sea. She had to follow them…

Instinctively, she soared on with them, leading and following at the same time, bathing in this wondrous light once more while she soared about the crystal. She then began to fly upwards, directly vertical as she felt her fingers barely brush past the crystal while she soared upwards to where a glorious bright light shone.

And as she flew, she could feel that voice speak rather than hear it. Feeling as if that this voice was now holding her close in her arms; embracing her like the purest of love.

'Go now, my child, and shine thy Light on all creation.'

Speaking of light… Claire was flying straight upwards now, and she shut her eyes tightly as she soared, past the crystal and into the golden light above them.

And when she next opened her eyes, she could see nothing but cold stone above her head and the smell of salty air filling her nose. She sat up slowly, rubbing her head dizzily, wondering just what it was that happened and trying to remember where she was.

That dream again?

No… different… completely different than before. And yet, still the same? Unlike the last dream, she could recall this one perfectly. But… what was that crystal? Where was it now? Who was speaking? And what did her words mean?

Deliver them from this fate? Crystals of Light? By thy deeds…? Shine thy Light? What was going on? Someone wanted something from her… but it was like she was being given a task to do where she knew not the answer.

“Awake again, are we?” asked a voice and Claire jumped before looking over to see that the conjurer from before was there. As soon as she saw her, her memory came back of the events prior to her ‘dream’ state. The mi’qote was kneeling in front of the dead goobbue and was examining it with great interest.

“Aha,” she said as she reached up and pulled something from between the mossy back of the creature and then stood up.

Claire watched as the mi’qote conjurer held up a short knife, looking unremarkably plain, and began to study it as she did the goobbue.

“The poor creature's fury was kindled with cruel forethought. See this blade?” she asked her though Claire did not say anything, “I found it in the goobbue's back. I have seen knives of this kind before — they are most commonly used for the cutting of rope. It would appear our culprits are seafaring men of some persuasion...piratical being the most probable.”
The mi’qote then looked over her as Claire pushed herself onto her shaky feet, still feeling light-headed and confused as to what just happened.

“In any event, you seem much recovered from your sudden...affliction,” her new friend said in concern, “I confess, I was rather taken aback when you collapsed at the very moment of our victory. Mayhap a surfeit of aether...?”

“I’m fine,” Claire reassured her as she looked around but not finding a trace of the crystal she had seen before, and asked instead, “A dream… I think. Of a towering crystal? Or… was I dreaming again?”

That last part she added softly to herself, not entirely sure what she should believe at this point.

“I beg your pardon?” the woman repeated in confusion, “A ‘towering crystal’? I'm sure I don't—Oh.” Claire saw how her eyes widen just a fraction and was now looking at her with great interest.

Claire tilted her head at that, but the woman just shook her head with a sympathetic look—yet there was new interest in her face as well. For she was now studying her as much as she had done to the goobbue and the knife.

“Well, well... This has been a day of unexpected revelations,” she said with something new in her smile. “I must continue my investigation. In the meantime, I suggest you deliver this knife to your patron, along with a warning concerning the pirates' probable involvement in this murky business. The days ahead promise little rest, I fear...” She passed the small knife to her before giving her a wave and a smile and began to back out of the cave, “May our paths cross again under the light of the Crystal.”

“Wait…” Claire began as she gave chase… yet no sooner did she follow after her and out of the cave, the bright light from overhead temporarily blinded her. While nowhere near as bright as the light she saw in the dream, she still winced at that had had to squeeze her eyes tight until she was able to get her sight back.

And, of course, by the time that she did, the strange conjurer was nowhere to be seen. Sighing a little unhappily, she tucked the knife into her bag, feeling more alone than ever as she tried to grasp what happened.

With no other reasons to remain behind, she began the trek back up the hills and to Summerford Farms to speak with Staelwyrn.

Still, during the long walk, her mind thought back to the strange dream she had. It had felt so real… she felt so… safe in that space. The light bathing her body and sinking into her very skin… and the pain in her head…? She couldn’t have imagined it, right? Not unless she got hit harder than she thought by that rampaging goobbue?

It was as if someone had been squeezing her head very tightly the moment she saw the…?

That was when she placed her hand upon her chest and she found it there… nestled right inside her… right at her heart. The blue crystal from the cave… she pulled it out, and stared at the tiny thing. Just large enough to fit comfortably in her hand as she stared at it. Such a tiny thing… but the more she looked at it, the more she could feel as if she was holding onto a piece of the ocean. It was slightly wet to the touch, and seemed to pulsate like the coming of the tides… and if she held it up to her ear, she could almost swear that she heard those very same tides… though it could just be because they were right above the oceans. Still, she held onto it, knowing that she wasn’t completely out of her mind.
A part of her mind was warning her to toss the crystal away from her... that it would bring her bad luck if she held onto it. Yet... the longer that she gazed into the crystal, the more... connected she felt to that voice from before. She could not bear the idea of letting go of it. So, instead, she tucked it back inside her robe... where—by some magic—it melted right into her very heart and she could feel the tides there as well.

So she wasn’t completely crazy... but she still had no idea of what was happening to her. She would hold onto the crystal for now... until she had more answers. She only wish she knew who it was who had spoken to her. Who it was who held her so lovingly in that embrace? Who were they? And what did they want with her?

These questions continued in a cycle over and over the whole way back to Summerfold Farms, to where Staelwyrn was waiting.

“Faye!” he cried out in relief when he saw her returning, “Right glad am I to see you safely returned! My lads were all gabbin' about hearin' what sounded like all seven hells breakin' loose near the grotto, and I feared I'd sent you to your death. If you were in the middle of that commotion, I hope it yielded somethin' of interest. I'd hate to think you'd risked your life for naught.”

She nodded and reassured him that she was hale and whole before explaining what happened. Of the goobbue who went bursting in, leaving her no choice but to be put down. That was when she pulled out the knife and explained how it had been found lodged in its back; which was probably the cause for its aggressiveness.

Staelwyrn took the knife and looked over it with a critical eye.

“Hmmm... A blade pulled from the back of a creature you slew at the cave, eh?” he summed up as he studied the knife, “Aye, I'd agree that such a knife would be part of any seafarin' man's kit. I'm startin' to think that these ruffians are pirates, come to lure my farmhands back to a life of plunder.” He looked back down at her and added seriously, “Chances are, they didn't take kindly to your appearance on their doorstep, and set a maddened goobbue on you.”

Well, that certainly explained a few things. And judging from the way that the goobbue attacked that scholar along with her, she felt a little better at the thought that she hadn’t just let the one who may have been responsible for the kidnappings to escape.

“Aye, the pirates have been addin' to their numbers of late,” Staelwyrn nodded, “I'd best warn the lads and lasses in my employ to be on guard against their schemes.”

Claire nodded in agreement, pausing for a moment before deciding to tell him about the mi’qote woman she had seen earlier, realizing that she hadn’t been able to ask for her name before she left.

“...Hm? You met someone else at the grotto?” he asked as she nodded, doing her best to describe her. Apparently, that was enough for him to understand for he nodded and reassured her, “Ah...Y’shtola! She's been in Limsa Lominsa for a good while now. Her studies of the aether often bring her out to Summerford, so her presence at the grotto is hardly unusual. She's an odd-lookin' lass, I grant you, but she's not the kind to associate with kidnappers. You may take my word for that.”

Well, that’s one less thing to worry about, anyway. This Y’shtola didn’t seem like a bad person to her anyway, if a little bit... shrewd. Still, she did help her with that fight and Staelwyrn didn’t seem to be concerned with her lurking about. One less person to suspect anyway.
“Where trust should be lackin' is in those yeomen of mine who have yet to wholly relinquish their pirate pasts,” Staelwyrn sighed suddenly, “The temptation to return to the free and easy life of a buccaneer may prove too strong to resist.”

But after giving his head a firm shake, he forced a smile and said, “You have my thanks, Faye. If it weren't for the efforts of stalwart adventurers like yourself, this farm would be in a far worse state than it is. Just you keep on lendin' your talents to those in need, eh? Help bring Limsa the brighter future she deserves.”

Claire nodded, promising to do what she could before he sent her off, telling her to go back to the city for a time and recover from what happened. He didn’t feel right asking her for anything else until she got some food and rest; which she was grateful for even though she wasn’t injured.

After looking over the money pouch and all the gil that she earned this day, she decided to head back to the Hawker’s Alley and treat her to a meal.

Yet even with the idea of food filling her mind, she still felt a sense of unease in her belly as she paused while she was crossing over a bridge. The river below her could hardly be called a river, barely coming up to one’s ankles; yet, as she looked over the side she could still see her reflection looking back at her. As she gazed down at the water, she felt her carbuncle rub its fury, jeweled head against her hand, causing her to smile.

She began to pet it as it purred into her hands happily and sat there in content with her. But Claire felt her smile fade slightly as she gazed back down at her reflection—wondering why the sight of her face troubled her so suddenly.

She didn’t look any differently than when she last saw her reflection. Well, mayhaps she did look a little too well after her first real battle. There wasn’t even a scratch on her—which she merely chalked up to Y’shtola’s healing—but other than that, she looked the same. And yet, in her heart, she knew that she was not the same? She didn’t know what was wrong. Why did she still feel like she stood out like a goobbue in a marketplace? She watched as her reflection ran her hand through her messy pink hair and looked back up at her with concerned green eyes… finding that she couldn’t help but feel… changed somehow.

She didn’t like it.

She didn’t like how lost and confused she felt at that moment. She supposed that she was all the more grateful for her carbuncle’s sudden companionship.

What Claire wasn’t aware of that there was someone watching her leave Summerford Farms, observing her with a curious expression as she stood at that bridge for quite some time. Eventually, her observer heard the familiar ring of the linkpearl in her ear and answered it.

“Tis I,” she stated, never taking her eyes off the adventurer. “No need to apologize for not being able to get back to me right away. Things have calmed down somewhat.”

She then explained everything that happened at the grotto before she finished up, “I will leave a full report for you to read soon. Thancred should be passing through the city later so I’ll send it along with him. There is no need to worry about me however, I am perfectly well. I am merely making sure that my new adventurer friend returns to the city without being attacked. I am certain that whoever set that goobbue upon us was targeting her. And I can’t imagine that they would be pleased to learn that she survived her encounter.”

“Yes, you mentioned her earlier,” the female’s voice answered on the other end, “About your
“I am,” Y’shtola confirmed as she watched the adventurer finally leave the bridge with the carbuncle at her heels. “As far as I can tell, she is not from Eorzea… at least, not from Limsa. She seems to have recently arrived to Limsa Lominsa on the last ship along with Alphinaud and Alisaie. I would have thought that it was just aether sickness that caused her to collapse without warning. But when she awoke, she portrayed none of the usual symptoms. Instead, she spoke of having a dream with a towering crystal speaking to her. I have no other proof yet, but I believe that she may possess a gift similar to yours. After seeing how well she handled herself earlier, I do believe she has much potential.”

“Understood,” the voice on the other end said, “We shall not jump to conclusions yet. Just keep an eye on her. When you have seen all that you feel you need to know, I will trust your judgement.”

“Agreed,” Y’shtola said as she lowered her hand and watched the adventurer venture out further from the farm and seemed to be heading back to the city for the time being. At first glance, she seemed no different than any other adventurer… but…? She took the small contraption from around her neck and looked closer at her through the goggles. The aether now flowed differently around her… very different than how it was before their fight with the goobbue. Or… was it always that way?

All she knew now was that when she looked at it… it was almost… shining… like starlight.

As well as…?

Her eyes narrowed as she looked off in the opposite direction to where she momentarily felt the presence of another being. Something was hiding in the shadow of the farm and watching this adventurer’s every step… as if it was also interested in this woman.

Which left Y’sthola all the more reason to want to stick around.
Now with a fell around Limsa, it is time to start getting to some real work. Life on the farm isn't as easy as one would think... but with pirates, kidnappings, strange visions and a mysterious figure robed in black watching your every step, you know that things are about to get interesting.

Claire spent the next few days traveling around Limsa and out into the field of La Noscea. Running various jobs for the farmers and sailors who lived there—so she was beginning to learn the lay of the land. As she slowly began to grow more confident in her skills, she travelled farther and farther out with every venture—sometimes out all throughout the night. She was growing more curious about the other areas that were close by and after studying her map, she felt her curiosity growing more and more.

Yet, still considered a new adventurer, she knew that she couldn’t rush it right away unless she wanted to get herself killed. She would have to be patient and grow stronger before risking anything more dangerous than this.

And she felt that the best way to do that was to continue to accept these quests from her ‘customers’ she supposed the best way to put it was. And it was working. She was making good coin for her efforts, and word was getting out that there was a capable adventurer in the area. Eventually, she decided to return to Summerford Farms once she took care of all the other jobs that the farm had to offer. Staelwyrin had heard about all the work she had done, and was very pleased to see her.

When she next arrived, she heard that there as something new happening during her time away. “That sea-sloth Sevrin and his lot—” Staelwyrin cursed bitterly under his breath, “Never around when there’s work to be done!” He sighed as he looked at her apologetically and added, “I’d sooner hire you for the sake of gettin’ things done, but then the rapscallions would never learn. Round them up and let them know that Staelwyrn would like a word. And don’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

She almost felt like a babysitter at this point, but she did what she was told. She left the farm and went wandering about the area, looking for anyone who looked like they were slacking off and questioning them. It took her a few hours, but she was able to track down Sevrin and the others, most of them finding excuses to complain about how miserable their lives were now compared to when they were pirates.

Still, after a little questioning, she was able to get them to return to work without much trouble. The exception being Sevrin, who certainly made his opinion of her known when he told her to leave this area and head back to where she came from.

Claire remained silent as he vented his frustration with her before marching off. She rolled her eyes, knowing that she hadn’t done anything wrong, and that it was not her fault that they didn’t like taking orders from an ‘outsider’. She was at least glad that not everyone thought this way of her.
“You continue to impress, lass,” Staelwyrn told her, “All but Sevrin are accounted for.”

This surprised her, for she was certain that Sevrin had returned by now. She opened her mouth to apologize, promising that she would go out again and find him—yet it seemed that he already guessed what she was about to say.

“It’s no fault of yours he squirmed out,” he reassured her, “I’ve let that worm wriggle through my fingers more times than I can count. But rest assured, the next time I see him, I’ll put him squarely in the dirt, where all such worms belong.”

He sighed before giving her a new task to deliver a sack of oranges to one of the checkpoints. He asked that she track Sevrin down and question him on what he did with the sack. Doing what she was told, she realized something strange beginning to happen to her… she didn’t know why she set off in this particular direction… nor why she didn’t think to question Staelwyrn on where Sevrin was… she could somehow… sense it.

She just wandered down the road, somehow allowing her feet to carry her away from the farm and in this one direction… but she was not surprised to find that she found Sevrin almost right away. He was standing on the road, looking pale and was shaking as a leaf as she approached him from behind.

“Bloody hells,” she heard him curse to himself. “I’m up the strait without a paddle!”

He then noticed that someone was listening in and jumped in panic, letting out a cry of shock. Seeing it was her, he then demanded, trying to sound angry but the tremble in his voice gave him away, “What’s this now?”

She merely calmly informed him that Staelwyrn wanted to know what he did with the oranges he was supposed to take to the Checkpoint.

“Staelwyrn sent you for the oranges? Huh… so the old bugger had known all this time… Argh, what does it matter anyway?” Sevrin demanded fervently before adding with an urgent tone, “Listen, you’re one of those goody-goody adventurer types, right? Go rescue me mates from those double-dealin’ goblins! They’re just over yonder by the bonfire.”

She raised her eyebrows at him as she bit back the retort she made. She would have to deal with his rudeness later, right now she had to go in before anyone got hurt.

At first, she considered that he may have said to get her to leave so that he could make a break for it. Yet, much like the sense that led her to find her in the first place, something was now telling her that there was something happening to the north of here. So she set off, quickly hurrying across the green fields until she spotted three people cowering by a campfire as goblins surrounded them.

She stepped up and frighten the goblins so badly that those who she didn’t kill, turned heel and ran for it. As she paused to help the three farm-hands to their feet, they made sure to thank her before they cursed Sevrin for leaving them behind; and they went running off back in the direction of Summerford Farms.

As a reward for this, she returned to find that Sevrin had remained where he was; waiting for her to return. After reassuring him that his friends were on their way back to the farm, she could see how his shoulders slacked with relief.

“You saved me mates, and for that, I owe you,” he said, merely giving her the sack of oranges before he also went running off.
Claire found out right away that arguing and questioning only seemed to make her job more difficult. She wasn’t sure why that was, but she found that talking too much tired her more than anything else did. Even when she was running head-long into a crowd of Dodo’s or wharf rats, nothing seemed to wear her down more than when she had to talk to someone.

And she hated feeling tired.

So, silently, she heaved the heavy sack over her shoulders, hauling it the rest of the way to the Checkpoint—arriving on time for the delivery. The guards who stood there were so happy to see someone other than Sevrin arrive with all the oranges that they felt they could trust her enough with the full payment for it.

With only the slightest bit of temptation for the sack of gil, she returned to the farm and handed it over to Staelwyrn before explaining what happened.

Staelwyrn was growing more and more impressed with her work, and even reached into the sack of gil to pay her for her work. After that, he had her running more errands for him, making sure to pay her every time she returned, with a hard day’s work.

Soon enough, after word had gotten out that an adventurer was earning all this money from the farm with her hard work, some of the more lazy workers were getting back to work, for fear that they would be put out of a job. Staelwyrn was growing happier and happier with each passing moment… the only real problem was Sevrin and how he seemed to be causing trouble wherever he went.

At one point, pirates were making off with tools and she brought the attention to Staelwyrn after she helped to retrieve them. According the man at the tool shed, Pfrewahl, he had seen Sevrin earlier that day showing off these tools to some of the pirates and concluded that he may have been giving them away.

“Pirates makin’ off with our tools?” Staelwyrn questioned hotly, “Pfrewahl did well not to take matters into his own hands. Last thing I need is blood on my crops. But I’ll be damned if Sevrin thinks he can take us for fools. His treachery won’t go unpunished.”

He was growing more and more frustrated with Sevrin, and Claire wondered why he hadn’t thrown him out by now if he was causing so much trouble.

He sighed before looking back down at her.

“I’ve come to expect a great deal from you, lass,” he told her, “And you’ve never once let me down. Yet what I’d ask of you now goes beyond aught I’ve asked before. Would you hear my plea all the same?”

She nodded, wanting to see this task through to the end, and she could see the gratitude in his face.

“It eases my mind to have your ear,” he said to her, before his tone growing graver, “You’re no doubt familiar with that scoundrel Sevrin by now. Well, the schemin’ scapegrace is at it again. Since that letter came for him, he’s been skulkin’ about in that manner he does when he’s up to no good.”

He scratched his head and added, “I’ve grown accustomed to his insolence, but somethin’ tells me this is different. It ain’t exactly damin’, but when last I had words with him, he didn’t look defiant so much as hunted. I can’t help thinkin’ he’s gone lookin’ for trouble and found more than he wanted. So I was hopin’ you might hunt his sorry hide down and drag it back here before it’s too
late.”

She nodded and he actually smiled this time to her.

“The ungrateful little cure bites me every chance he gets, but I can’t quite bring myself to cut him loose,” Staelwyrn confessed, unknowingly answering a question she had, “I s’pose he reminds me a bit of my younger self. Suffice it to say, I’d rather he didn’t come to a sticky end. As for how to find him, I’d try askin’ Grynewyda at the aetheryte. She was the last one to see him. I daresay she’ll be able to tell you where he was headed.”

So she went to see the girl, who was overseeing the area and asked her when she last saw Sevrin.

“Nothing that passes through those gates escape my notice!” Grynewyda said proudly before her face grew stormy at the mention of Sevrin. She then snorted out in disgust, “I saw the rouser and his rabble set out for Woad Whisper Canyon not long ago, singing about drinking themselves stupider. Cheeky sods said I should join them! I told them I’d rather shrivel up than sip whatever it was that had pickled their brains. If you find the idle swine, be sure and give them a cuff ’round the ear from me, will you?”

With a nod, she thanked her for the information and set off. She had a good idea to where the canyon was at this point, having travelled across this part of La Noscea enough times to get a feel for where everything was. The canyon was off to the side, and in between the two halves of Middle La Noscea. After the damage from the Calamity, the land was split in two halves, where one half was raised higher than the other—and the two chunks of land were connected through bridges and scaffolding. The only way that one could travel from one half to the other was to use the bridge and planks.

She was able to find it quickly enough, and no sooner did she begin her descent did she find one of the farm hands on his knees, trying to continue on but was too winded to do so. She ran to him and helped him up as he wheezed out, “Of all the dirty, deceitful, downright dastardly deeds that slippery bastard’s done!”

She recognized him as Aymer, one of the men she had seen earlier being attacked by those goblins and one of the men who left with Sevrin as she asked what happened. He looked to her and explained, “Claimin’ to take the lads out for a drink, only to lead us straight into a bloody trap! It don’t get no lower than that!”

He ran passed her, not bothering to look back as she ran off to the side where the planks led to a stony ledge that led into the canyon. She ran alongside that cliff edge that overlooked the river before spotting the normally loud Eyrimhus in the road. Another one of the farm hands, and though his usually tipsy, red face was now very pale and he was struggling to get up.

When she asked what happened, he croaked, “My axe may as well’ve been a white flag for all the good it did… Hope you fare better, or the sorry bastards in there are done for.”

Without giving her any other explanation, he took off just like how Aymer did, forcing her to go deeper into the cave for some answers. When she reached the end of the road, she spotted another farm hand… a lalafell by the name of Sozai Razai, cowering behind a rock that hid him from view of whatever was going on in the valley. Claire ran up behind him and looked out to see what was going on.

A large man with half of his face painted blue had just thrown Sevrin—who was bound with his hands behind his back—to the ground as a pair of female pirates with blue tattooed slashes on their faces watched with smirks.
Sozai Razai jumped as she knelt down next to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Are you alright?” Claire asked the farmhand quietly as he quaked.

“Sozai Razai gasped, “I’d sooner bow to a fishback than be in that connivin’ bastard’s debt! To arms!”

Claire quietly calmed him down—for in all honesty, he looked ready to pass out at any moment—and then told him to go and get help while she dealt with this. He looked like he wanted to help, but the overwhelming fear of being unable to find anything to do to help was too strong and he nodded. He dashed back as she looked back to the group, wondering if she could take all three out at once.

But then the leader of the group towered over Sevrin as the other two smirked at the sight of him tied up.

“A true knave!” she heard him spat, “You betray even yourself, Sevrin.”

He then kicked him Sevrin in the ribs as he let out a painful moan.

“We were prepared to overlook the matter of your desertion on the condition that you provided us with suitable replacements,” the tattooed man went on loudly, as if not caring who overheard him, “That was the agreement. Yet your latest change of heart leaves your debt to us unpaid. Few are they who betray the Serpent Reavers twice. You will not do so a third time.”

Claire was sure she had an idea to what was going on, but that wasn’t important right now. She slowly stood up and ran out from her hiding place to face them. She knew that it was reckless and stupid, but if she didn’t do anything, then they were sure to either kill Sevrin or haul him away before any help arrived.

The tattooed men smirked when he saw her standing there before addressing Sevrin.

“Cowering behind your protector will only delay the inevitable,” he spat, “Honorless wretch… your life is all you have left. And worthless though it be, we shall take it!”

But instead of reaching for his weapon, Claire watched how his eyes turned to look to the rocks behind them. Fearing ambushers, she looked out of the corner of her eyes to see what he was looking at. Instead of a group of blood-thirsty pirates though… she saw just… one man. He was standing in the shadows of the rocks as he observed the area… dressed head to foot in a long, black cloak with a black leather hood and purple markings. He also had some sort of silvery, spiked adornments with spiked fingered gloves… but what got her attention the most was the empty, black mask that covered his face.

“O mournful voice of creation!” the masked mage chanted, and she found something wrong with his voice, though she wasn’t sure what it was. Only that his voice seemed… wrong to her ears. But the masked mage went on, “Send unto me a creature of the abyss, my thrall to command, that I may smite mine enemies!”

Just as she reached for her grimoire, she saw the rocks and boulders moving around her. The ground began to shake as the stones flew up into the air and began to melt together as a lopsided form began to take shape. The two female pirates backed up in terror at the sight of the moving stone creature and fled even as their leader paused only long enough to smirk at her before leaving her and Sevrin to deal with this thing.

She hated letting them go, but she had bigger problems as the stone creature towered over her,
growing golden eyes that shone from the blackened stone as it swung its fist down at her. She dodged it as she summoned her Topaz Carbuncle to take its attention off her for the moment and she could come up with a plan. It was all about staying calm, and she was pleased that she was able to remain so as she moved about the area, as light as a dancer.

“*You are strong,*” the masked mage said from the distance, but she couldn’t risk pausing to look to see if he was watching as he finished, “*But are you strong enough to withstand this?*”

Well, they will find out. She could suddenly sense an attack coming her way—energy being stored up in the core of this creature—and she moved behind it just as it unleashed the attack. It cracked the ground and she felt it tremble beneath her, but she didn’t think too much about it, knowing that she missed the worse of it.

She moved this way and the other, sending another one coming her way. Somehow, she could sense when the creature was charging up and about to unleash its attacks. She was able to stand far enough away to avoid the attack while dodging the swinging fists, which could easily crack her entire head in two.

She kept this up even as she heard masked mage gasp slightly, “*Impossible! Never has the golem been so sorely tested!*”

Well, if he didn’t like that, then he was really going to hate this next part. She figured out that the same place where the energy was being stored up for the attacks was right in its chest… like its heart. She weakened the stone around the chest cavity enough that she was able to send one powerful Ruin spell right between the cracks and struck at the core.

She watched as the stone stopped moving and then cracked apart… becoming lifeless rock once more and fell to the ground. She stood there, still calm and relaxed… not realizing it was over until she saw her foe lying defeated at her feet. She set her weapon away as she stared around, ready to take care of that masked man… but when she looked to the rocks he was hiding at before… he was gone.

She was just beating herself up for not paying attention when she heard his voice on the wind. “*That the golem could be vanquished… That woman is no ordinary adventurer.*”

She jerked her head up to a part of the waterfall—having the strangest sensation that was where the masked man had been before… unable to shake the feeling that he had been watching her until that moment. Yet there was no one there… even though her senses were screaming at her that she could feel cold eyes looking at her.

She stared at that spot for a time before her thoughts were interrupted when she heard footsteps. Thinking that those pirates were back, she spun around, ready to fight… only to be taken aback when she saw that it was Y’shtola running towards her.

She watched as Y’shtola looked around, realizing that they were alone and sighed a little disappointedly, “…The snake slithered away.”

The strange Miqo’te lass then looked over at her with a faint smile and confessed, “*I am only glad he did not have the chance to sink his fangs more deeply into you.*”

As Claire looked into those bright turquoise eyes, she felt it. A terrible pain attacked her skull and she screwed her eyes as her hand went up to hold her head. This pain couldn’t be from the battle, could it? With it now over and the adrenaline now wearing off she was feeling the full pain from
it? Why start now, though?

She just felt as if someone was squeezing her head and her eyes were being forced out of her head as she tried to keep her eyelids closed as the agony came… and went.

*memory*

Strange, she could have sensed that there was something happening here.

Having left the main square of Limsa behind her, she began to follow through the streets, trying to clear her mind of some of the many troubles that were happening lately. Well, maybe not lately… the troubles that Limsa was facing was the same as the other nations since the Calamity five years ago. However, these days it feels that trouble was beginning to brew from every shadowy corner of Eorzea.

That was when she spotted a group of pirates up ahead of her, talking amongst themselves.

Frowning a little, she moved to duck behind the rock, trying to strain her ears to eavesdrop—but was too far away to do so. Instead, she poked out her head to look at the three figures discussing their business. She did not recognize them nor the colors they were wearing… which she didn’t like at all. Especially when she remembered the recent kidnappings happening in the city lately.

“They pirates do not belong to any of the known Lominsan factions…” she whispered softly, trying to figure out from whence they hail from, “Whom then do they serve? The beast tribes? Surely not.”

The idea that anyone would willingly serve any of the beast tribes was ludicrous to her eyes. Yet… as she watched the captain of this crew hand over something to one of his subordinates… she slowly began to ponder if there was more to this than she originally thought.

“But the timing of their appearance coincides all too neatly with the recent surge in Sahagin and kobold activity…” she reasoned with herself, “Something is afoot. The question is: what?”

She began to ponder this as her tail flicked around her legs in an agitated way.

“…Could it be that the tribes are planning to summon their primals?” she questioned, trying to keep the fear that took hold in her heart at such an idea. “Twelve help us if it should prove so. Limsa would be hard-pressed to keep a single primal at bay, let alone two. But all is yet speculation. I must needs find evidence.”

She poked her head back out to see the pirates had concluded whatever business they had and were now leaving.

She also left, planning to keep a close watch on things here for the time being. But she better be prepared to warn the others… they need to be ready for whatever came their way.

Just then, the image faded around Claire once more… and when the image returned to her, the first thing she saw was water. She was standing at the docks and staring at the water lapping up against the docks below her… trying to find some form of comfort from the stress that was slowly threatening to tear her apart.

She was completely alone and the only thing that she could hear was the sounds of the waves… it was so quiet… even the gulls were gone this day… as if they sensed that disaster was coming.

“The seas continue to rise…” she whispered sadly before looking to the sky to see the red moon
hanging above her. The size of it had grown considerably over the last few days. Where it had once been a tiny glint in the sky, hardly bigger than the other twinkling stars, was now close enough for one to see the metal upon its surface and the spike-like points that jutted out of it like a pin-cushion. And it would only continue to grow larger…

She felt sick just looking at it as it cast the sky around it in a blood-red hue.

“While the lesser moon continues to fall…” she whispered as she felt a slight tremble in her hands, “And ilm by ilm, the world becomes ever more unlike itself. It is as Louisoix foretold…”

She knew that Master Louisoix had a plan, and just the idea of it was enough to bring some comfort to her. She could remember how the kindly old man smiled at them, as he promised he would not let Eorzea fall. But instead of joining in the upcoming fight, he sent her and the others to the city states, telling them to be ready when the time came.

She closed her eyes as she told the ache in her heart, “The coming of chaos has rendered the laws of nature mutable, blurring the boundary between the material and aetherial planes… Little now stands between us and the primalss.”

She had reservations over this plan, yet she trusted Louisoix completely and knew that this was the only course of action they had left. So what other choices did they have?

She opened her eyes and added firmly, “…But they are not here yet. ‘Though time be against us, hope shall ever be on our side.’ Never did the creed of Sharlayan ring more true.”

This was the only way she could quell the confusion that was keeping her up at night. She was of Sharlayan after all. She was proud of that and she wasn’t going to betray herself to fear. She would have to do her part when the time came. Until then, she would trust in Louisoix… she would prepare for the worse… and pray to the Twelve for the best.

The image faded around Claire once more and she was suddenly sitting upon a crate at the docks. She was observing the land around her with a new device that their allies had sent to her and her fellows. She was looking around with it… amazed at what she could see. The aether… the very lifeforce they all have… flowing through the world was so plain to see.

There were many people walking the docks this day as they celebrated and she could see the aether of every one of them… a mixture of different colors and energies that swirled together like dye in the water.

The device was able to show her how they radiated off them… the people… the plants… the sea… even the stone beneath her feet itself…

“Never did I dream that I would possess the means to see aether… yet now that I do, I do begin to take it for granted,” she sighed, disappointed how easily the child-like amazement faded away. “How swiftly do the wonders of Sharlayan seem commonplace…”

“Um…?” said a voice and she looked to see a young girl, standing before her with a basket of flowers.

She quickly removed the device so that she could see her properly—a little startled at how her rose pink aether vanished as soon as her eyes were cleared of the metal around her face. She smiled instead at the girl, who held up the flower to her.

“Here, for you,” she said happily, “Have you come for the festivities? Today the maelstrom officially makes that great hole in the sea its training ground. Join in the celebrations!”
She smiled warmly at her as she took the flower, breathing in the sweet smell as she watched the girl run off to hand out more flowers from her basket.

Curiosity getting the better of her, she jumped down from the crate and put on the goggles so that she could see the aether that this flower had... yet as soon as she put it on... she could see a flash happening out of the corner of her eyes. Startled she looked up to see the streams of aether flowing through the air about her... no. something was interrupting the smooth flow it had been before and was now gathering somewhere.

“Wait,” she said, “A disturbance in the aetheric flow. But whence does it emanate?” After doing a quick calculation, she watched as it seemed to be settling somewhere over Middle La Noscea... and judging from the location...?

“...Seasong Grotto, perhaps?”

Curiosity getting the better of her, she went to go investigate

*End*

As quickly as it had all come... it was gone.

The pain in her head had faded and Claire was blinking in the bright sunlight. She stared about her, breathing hard as the shock of what just happened began to emerge. What was that? What happened? A... a dream? A vision? What?

“What have we here...?” Y’shtola’s voice said and for a moment she feared it came out of her mouth like it did in the waking daydream she had. “Can you walk?”

She turned her head in time to see that Y’shtola had untied Sevrin, who just got to his shaky feet. He was trembling as she watched Y’shtola’s hand go up to her ear.

“Tis I,” she said to whoever was on the other end of the linkpearl as Claire watched, breathing hard.

“Regrettably, no,” she went on speaking to the unheard question, “he eluded me.” She was silent for another moment before nodding and answering back, “Understood. I will inform the Commodore.”

That was when she noticed that Claire was watching her and turned back to say, “You collapsed from your exertions. Are you suitably recovered?”

Claire didn’t answer. She just stared at her as the images of what she had just seen continued to play themselves over and over inside her head. She was about to ask about them when Y’shtola went on speaking.

“Sevrin here has apprised me of all that transpired,” she told her before she could utter a word, “His account shed some light upon how you came to be attacked by a golem of all things. A golem is a mindless automaton, inert save when commanded to be otherwise. Common pirates could not hope to control such a thing, so arcane are its workings. But then these tattooed wretches are no common pirates—they are the minions of the Sahagin. As to their purpose... well, we’ll get to the bottom of it.”

Y’shtola looked back to Sevrin, who had kept his head down when she finished up, “But first I must escort Sevrin back to his place of employment. I daresay Staelwyrn will be wondering what has become of him.”
Right, she almost forgot about that. Staelwyrn was probably worried that something happened to them—especially since the other farm hands should have made it back by now.

“And you too, for that matter,” Y’shtola added suddenly, interrupting her train of thoughts, “I will bear word to him of your preservations, but I am certain he would like to thank you in person. Pray pay the man a visit.”

And as if she was afraid of being rude, she added quickly, “Ah… he told me of you, but perchance he did not tell you of me. My name is Y’shtola. I am… a naturalist of sorts, surveying the aether in the hope that it might offer up some clue as to our predicament.”

Claire could only numbly nod, having already known about that.

“I’d say I owed you my life… but that don’t cover it,” Sevrin added, shame-faced before taking a deep breath, “If it weren’t for you, my friends would be dead, an’ all… ‘Tis a debt I can never repay. But I’ll not make things worse by runnin’ away. Take me to Summerford Farms, an’ I’ll face the consequences.”

She was a little surprised by that, but he showed no signs of lying nor of making a run for it. He began to walk off just as Y’shtola turned her sharp gaze to her once more, gazing closely as if she could see something different about her.

“For reasons I cannot fathom, you seem…” Y’shtola said as she looked her up and down as her voice trailed off. But whatever it was that she wanted to say seemed to die on the tip of her tongue, for she shook her head and added, “Forgive me. Mayhap we shall have a chance to speak again when I have marshaled my thoughts. Until our paths next cross, farewell.”

With those words, she left her, escorting Sevrin out of the canyon as Claire watched… being left alone with her thoughts.

She remained still for a long time before she realized that standing there wasn’t going to get her the answers she needed. She had wanted to talk to her about those visions… yet she was afraid of sounding crazy. Who would believe such a tale?

What was going on with her? Ever since she arrived here, there have been a series of strange things happening to her and she wasn’t sure she liked it. It all started off with that dream—which she wasn’t sure happened or not—when she first arrived on the boat. Ever since then she had been having these phantom pains in her head and visions that were making no sense. It happened back at Seasong Grotto where she dreamt of a towering crystal that was speaking to her… but today’s visions were the scariest ones she had so far. It felt as though she had truly gone back in time and became another person! But that didn’t make any sense! What was going on?

That was when she remembered something and paused just before she reached the scaffolding that would take her out of the canyon. She placed her hand over her chest and magically, the blue crystal she had found before appeared in her hand. She wasn’t sure what significance this crystal had… or how it was able to vanish and appear the way it did. Yet she was sure that it had something to do with whatever was happening to her of late.

The random thought of just throwing the crystal over the side and let the river take it away crossed her mind. But as she looked to it, she suddenly found that she couldn’t look away… a strange calmness suddenly overtook her as she stared down at it. It was shaped so perfectly that she couldn’t believe that it became this way naturally… and she was reminded of that warm voice she heard during those dreams.
That beautiful voice that seemed to hold nothing but love for her. She could feel that love when she heard it and she somehow knew that this crystal was a gift from the owner of that voice. She carefully held it to her chest once more and she let it fade back inside her.

She would have to find the answers another way.

She returned to the farm where she was disappointed to see that Y’shtola had already left. But Sevrin was there, talking to Staelwyrn, still looking pale though his shaking had stopped.

“Lo!” Staelwyrn called, waving merrily when he saw her approaching, “I knew you’d return. Y’shtola delivered Sevrin a bit ago. Tales of your heroic deeds precede you! The rest came shufflin’ back, too—the lot of ‘em sportin’ the same haunted expression.”

“It’s me who’s to blame for that—that an’ the rest,” Sevrin interrupted before she could explain what happened, “I was once a Serpent Reaver.”

Both of them looked to him in surprise. He was once part of that same crew as those other pirates had been? With a crew like that, who needed enemies?

“…A thrall to the Sahagin?” Staelwyrn gasped, his eyes as wide as plates, “Seven hells… Reavers may look and sound and act like pirates, but they’re naught but the fishbacks’ flunkies.”

Sevrin nodded and explained, “Us pirates ain’t much for laws, but there’s things we won’t do. We’ve got a code, see—but the Reavers’ve never followed a word of it. A few years back, they started snatchin’ law-abidin’ Lominsans. I’d only just taken my oath when our captain bent the knee to his new Sahagin masters. I knew I had to get away. So I crept off one night, got myself a new name, an’ found myself a new home—Summerford Farms. Trouble is, secrets don’t stay secret for long ‘round here, an’ word soon spread… all the way back to the sea.”

Perhaps that was one of the reasons he was so cold to her when she first arrived? He thought that she may have been one of his enemies after him?

Sevrin lowered his head and added, sounding choked up, “The penalty for desertion is death, but the Reavers offered me a way out instead—my freedom in exchange for my mates’.”

“The letter,” Staelwyrn said in understanding and Sevrin nodded.

“I dunno what I was thinkin’…” Sevrin sobbed, “I wasn’t bloody thinkin’. Too busy soilin’ meself.”

“Aye, but you got there in the end, didn’t you?” Staelwyrn reminded him kindly, “When the time came, you made the right decision. The men say little to me, but I hear ‘em talk of how you stood up to the Reavers at the last—of how you tried to give your life to save theirs.”

“Be that as it may, no deed, however good, can atone for the crime of betrayin’ your brethren,” Sevrin said, “I know that—I do. That’s why I’m going to hand myself over to the Yellowjackets. I’ll bring shame to the farm no more.”

Claire knew that while no permanent harm had been done, she could understand why he would feel this way. No matter what the reason was, she couldn’t condone someone abandoning their friends like that. Still, she couldn’t help but feel bad for him, knowing that Sevrin had a gun to his head and didn’t know what to do. But he wasn’t a terrible person, she could see that… people have been known to do worse things when they were scared after all.

“Hm,” Staelwyrn said slowly, “You’ll hear no arguments from me. Each man must sail accordin’
to his own moral compass. I just hope yours guides you back here someday. There will always be a place for you at Summerford Farms, lad.”

The news that he may still have a home once his punishment was over was enough to push Sevrin over the edge and he was crying as he wiped at his eyes.

“An’ I’ll always be in your debt, Staelwyrn,” he said gratefully before he slowly turned around and left, heading back to the direction of Limsa. The two watched him go off in silence before Staelwyrn turned back to her.

“I owe you a debt too, Claire,” he said thankfully, “Not once have you let me down. Thank you for savin’ the men of my farm.”

She nodded, glad that this whole matter was solved. At least for the moment. She knew better than to think that it was over. For those pirates—the Serpent Reavers—were still out there and she doubted that they were going to give up whatever plan it was they had that easily.

“If I could ask one more favor of you, it’d be this: tell Baderon what’s happened, from start to finish,” Staelwyrn said to her humbly, “I’m certain he’d put in a good word for Sevrin if he knew the whole story. Well, I reckon I’ve asked all I can possibly ask of you. Safe travels, lass.”

He gave her a gentle push after handing her a small sack of coin as ways of a ‘thank-you’. With nothing else to do in this area, she decided that heading back to Limsa would be the best course of action and returned to the Drowning Wench.

Baderon perked up immediately when he saw her enter the inn and welcomed her warmly as he asked about her little adventure. She told him everything she could remember, leaving nothing out… well, aside from the visions of the crystal and of Y’shtola at any rate.

When she finished, his jaw had fallen open in shock.

“…Bloody ‘ells! Life on the farm ain’t quite ‘ow I pictured it!” Baderon cried out as he shook his head, “Ah, but ye needn’t worry yerself over young Sevrin. The Yellowjacket as ‘ands out the punishments is a good mate o’ mine. If I ask ‘im nice, I reckon ‘e’d be willin’ to commute the lad’s sentence from ‘angin’ to keelhaulin’, kindly gent that ‘e is.”

She raised her eyebrows at him as he chuckled, giving her a reassuring smile and promised, “…Ah, I’m only jestin’ with ye! I’ll see ‘e’s treated fair.”

She nodded, glad for that. She held true to her belief that Sevrin wasn’t a bad person—just a little misguided. She was sure that if he told them everything, they would be much lighter with his punishment, especially since they have given the Yellowjackets a clue as to who is behind the kidnappings.

“Now, it sounds to me like ye’ve done everythin’ ol’ Staelwyrn asked o’ ye an’ more—justifyin’ me generous finder’s fee in the process,” Baderon told her brightly, “Much obliged, lass! As fer a reward… well, she’s a lonely lady, this Drownin’ Wench o’ mine. ‘Ow’d ye fancy keepin’ ‘er company fer a spell… with free room an’ board?”

She blinked in surprise as he pointed over to the innkeeper and added, “‘Venturin’ a tryin’ business, after all. Them as don’t rest their bones every now an’ again tend to end up with broken ones. An’ take it from me: fightin’ ain’t nearly so much fun when yer nursin’ a shattered arm. Got that? Good. There’ll always be a free bed fer ye, so make use of it.”

She nodded, feeling exhaustion in her very bones as he spoke. She couldn’t remember the last time
that she had a decent bed to sleep in and gladly took him up on his offer. Of course, he also gave her another offer she couldn’t refuse… adding her name for leves. Leves were a manner of odd jobs from clients who were willing to pay good coin for an honest day of work. This would help her greatly, and she nodded in full agreement, thanking Baderon for his kindness.

Baderon laughed at that and told her to just talk to the lady at the leve counter—T’mokkri—whenever she was up for a job and extra gil.

“Oh, an’ it’s all about board, case yer wonderin’,” he finished, once he was sure he told her everything he could think of, “We’re careful to stay on the Admiral’s right side in ‘ere—unlike some pirates I could mention… I tell ye, if it turns out they ‘ad aught to do with them kidnappin’s, there’ll be seven hells to pay. A proper bleedin’ reckonin’… Mayhap that’s what Limsa needs, though. On rough seas, sometimes ye ‘ave to rock the boat to right it. But we’ll ‘ave time fer such talk when yer well an’ rested. ‘Til then, enjoy the Wench’s ‘ospitality!”

Claire smiled at him thanked him sincerely. She was allowed into the small inn room, where the very basic of furniture was set up for guests. Not that she paid much attention at first to anything but the feathered bed waiting for her in the corner of the room. So, still fully clothed, she collapsed onto the bed, curling up tightly as she allowed her body the chance to rest.

But as she laid in bed, she brought out the blue crystal once more… gazing into it as she listened to the waves that seemed to come from both inside it and outside her window. She was exhausted…but in a good way. She knew that she had done good work this day and she was proud of that. She smiled as she felt her eyelids grow heavier and she rolled over as the crystal glinted gently next to her. All the while, she found herself dreaming of crystals and the endless fields of La Noscea…and of the lands beyond.

*Drowning Wench*

Baderon was just cleaning the countertop before someone appeared before him.

“’Ello there, Y’shtola!” he called merrily, “Didn’ think I’d see yer here this early! What brings yer by?”

“Oh, perhaps not much,” Y’shtola said carefully as she ordered her usual weak ale. “I just… I noticed that you were speaking to an adventurer a moment ago?”

“Venturer? Ah, yes, yer mean Claire?” he asked as he slid a drink her way. “Yes, arrived off a boat less than a week ago! Still a greenhorn and everythin’ but she seems a sweet lass. Not much of a talker, but ‘ey, she’s already makin’ an impression. Just finished wrappin’ up a problem over at Summerford Farms just now.”

“And what can you tell me about her?” Y’shtola asked curiously as he raised his eyebrows at her.

“Ey now, is there somethin’ I should know?” he asked slowly, “Cause that lass has been nothin’ but a real dimper damper since she got ‘ere.”

“Oh, nothing serious like that,” Y’shtola reassured him. “I saw her around Summerford Farms myself and was… impressed by her work. I was simply curiously if you knew anything else about her?”

Baderon still looked a little suspicious but he told her everything he knew about the girl… not that it was much to go by. That the young woman had only arrived in Limsa a few days ago and that she was starting off as an adventurer. She didn’t talk much about her past, and Baderon wasn’t about to
go nosing into other people’s private business. So... as to who this young woman was and where she came from... or even what she was doing here was still a mystery.

Y’shtola drank her ale quickly before thanking him, promising that she would pay her tab the next time she came through here. Baderon laughed, as if he didn’t believe a word she said, as she went off, heading out the door and towards the Bismarck to where her guests were waiting for her.

When she arrived, the wonderful smells of the kitchen filling her nose and making her stomach rumble a little as her eyes found the twins sitting at a table as they enjoyed their meal.

“Forgive me my brief tardiness,” she said as she approached the table and they both rose to greet her.

“No need to apologize,” Alphinaud said as he gestured to the empty seat. “We only just arrived ourselves. We weren’t sure what you would like, so we just ordered you a cup of tea. I believe I remember you once mentioning that you enjoy it?”

“Very much so,” Y’shtola confirmed as she sat down, “My master drank tea about ten times a day and whenever I brewed it wrong, she would make me brew it again until it was to her satisfaction. I suppose one cannot go through that without developing a fondness for the drink as well.”

She joined them, glad to rest her feet for a change as she asked them of their stay in Eorzea.

“Everything is going well,” Alphinaud informed her, “We will be meeting with the Admiral later tonight to discuss the state of Limsa Lominsa. After that, we will be heading off to Gridiana and meet with the Elder Seedseeer.”

“I believe that you will like them both,” Y’shtola reassured them. “Both of them are great leaders in their own right, though their approach is very different.”

The three of them then talked more about the city of Limsa and of the state of the two beast tribes who call this land their home as Alisaie ordered some dessert. And Y’shtola watched with mild amusement how the girl shoved an entire cookie into her mouth when her brother wasn’t looking.

“The Maelstrom keeps a watchful eye over both the Sahagin and the Kobolds,” she said instead, “As of right now, however, it would seem that the Kobolds are remaining quiet behind their borders. The Sahagin on the other hand...? I fear that they are plotting something. At least, their minions in the form of the Serpent Reavers, are plotting something.”

She then told her of the last few days where she had been investigating the state of the kidnappings that have been happening in town and how she believed she may be onto a trail. Or rather, a young adventurer was.

“And that is all that we know so far,” she finished, “Now after witnessing those pirates myself, I doubt that they could be behind this on their own. Someone is pulling their strings. To what end? I cannot say.”

“If that is how you feel, wouldn’t your time be better spent spying on these Serpent Reavers instead of following some adventurer around?” Alisaie asked, having spent much of the conversation silent, as she stirred her drink absent-mindedly. “I would have thought that you have better things to do with your time? Unless you believe her to be involved in these kidnappings?”

“Doubtful,” Y’shtola said as she looked at her own glass with a slight frown. “These disappearances have been happening over a prolonged period of time and this adventurer is still learning where everything is.”
“What do you know about her?” Alphinaud asked, though Y’shtola got the feeling that he was merely asking to be polite.

“Not much, I fear,” she said, “I only have a name. I cannot even rightly claim to know from whence she hails. I do know that she is not from Limsa Lominsa… at least, I have not seen her here before. Still, I feel that whoever is behind these kidnappings has taken a sudden interest in her.”

“And you believe that if you follow her around long enough, she could end up targeted by this mastermind?” Alphinaud asked as he took a long sip of his drink.

“Something like that,” Y’shtola shrugged, not sure she should tell anyone of her suspicions just yet. “For now though, it is all that I can do. So… what of you two? I know that Minfilia is anxious to meet you both?”

“We’ll be staying for a few more days,” Alphinaud reassured her. “Before we really get down to work, we will be needing a better idea to the situation and problems that each of the city states have. I hope you can understand that.”

“Of course,” Y’shtola said with a nod. “I understand completely. Well, if you need help with anything, don’t be afraid to seek me out. I know just about everything that happens in this city.”

Both twins thanked her for that as they prepared to leave. Y’shtola wished them the best of luck as she went back to her investigation. She wasn’t sure what was going on lately, only that there was something hidden in the shadows that she did not like. And these shadows seemed to be drawn to something… or someone.

She had only clues of what was going on… yet she could not find enough string to piece them together. She was sure that there was someone behind this plot… she only needed to follow the threads and see who was at the end of it.

*Days later*

Claire spent the next few days exploring further and further into the lands of La Noscea. She was able to get ahead in her studies as an Arcanist and was even encouraged to join other guilds in Limsa to broaden her horizons. She started off by going to the Blacksmith and Armorer’s guilds, and even found time take up the quiet pastime of fishing before she was introduced with the powers of an axe. She was finding her time here more enjoyable especially since, thanks to the levees she was doing, she was gaining experience she needed to rise up quickly. And with a bed waiting for her every time she returned to Limsa, she was able to find the time to sit back and really begin to enjoy herself.

Yet the idea of those visions continued to weigh upon her mind, especially since she had yet to run into Y’shtola again. She wasn’t sure why, but she wanted to speak with that scholar once more and see if she could get some answers. If nothing else, she could confirm if those vision she had of Y’shtola’s past were true or not and start to figure out what was going on.

She even paused several people and asked if they had seen the white-haired Miqo’te around these parts. While there was no shortage of Miqo’te coming and going in town, now one seemed able to give her any information on Y’shtola. In the end, she decided to simply put that out of her mind, for she had more important things to worry about.

On the third day after Baderon gave her a room at the inn, he asked her to venture out to the Skylift in Middle La Noscea to see if she could lend a hand. While she was there, she ended up running a series of deliveries, which took her out to Swiftperch in Western La Noscea. While there, she found
more work and jobs for her to do as she held the people there to improve the farmland where they could start producing crops again.

At one point, she was led to the lighthouse that overlooked the shore and was sent back to Limsa so that they could get new parts for a damaged furnace. While there, the Forgemaster decided to give her a job by delivering a letter to the foreman down at the Moraby Drydocks.

She hadn’t been to those parts just yet, but was greatly interested and agreed at once. She was told to find a man by the name of Ahtbyrm, and to deliver him an important message about the supplies that he needed.

After arriving in the small port of beautiful white stone, she realized that this was the place where the Lominsans built their ships. There were enormous planks of wood stacked up in various pies, crates full of tools, nails, and rope scattered about neatly while the sounds of hammering also reached her ears almost as soon as she stepped into port and the sailors were singing sea shanties as they worked.

When she approached the workers, asking after Ahtbyrm, they pointed terrified fingers towards the shoreline where a massive ship was being built.

As she approached, she could see the largest ship she had seen yet taking shape as it stood proudly up on land. It was a piece of art almost, the way the dark wood smelled of warm, almost maple trees, the way that the metal parts were polished to such a point that they shone like amour… so large that it cast them all in shadow as it stood against the bright midday sun. They had put a lot of time and effort into building this ship and she wondered how long it would be before it was ready to sail?

As she looked at it, she was called over by one of the workers, demanding to know what she was doing here. As she came to him, she had the strangest sense that this man was the one she was supposed to be looking for. She didn’t know why… she had yet to receive a proper description of Ahtbyrm… only that whenever someone spoke of him, it was with respect and no small amount of fear. And this man certainly looked like he fit the description of that.

As she calmly told him why she was here, it turned out that he was the same Ahtbyrm she was searching for.

“You have a missive for me from the Forgemaster H’naaza?” he questioned in surprise, “I assume it pertains to the pending arrival of the materials I ordered over a moon past. Let’s see it, then.”

She handed the letter over to him—but could tell right away that whatever was in it, wasn’t to Ahtbyrm’s liking. As he opened it and read over the note silently, she could see his grumpy expression becoming grumpier by the second.

“Blast and botheration!” he boomed once he reached the end of the message, “Another delay? I am well aware of the shortage of the skilled artisans, but this is insufferable!”

Claire was worried that he was going to start yelling at her, as if this was her fault. In fact, he looked ready to start yelling… yet as his eyes met her own… she saw that his anger was fading as quickly as it had come.

“My apologies,” he said gruffly with a rough sigh, “The messenger does not deserve to bear the brunt of my frustration.” And then, as if he couldn’t think of anything else to say, he asked, “Might I have your name?”
“Claire,” she answered simply, having a feeling that he was a man who preferred to getting to the point rather than dancing around the subject.

He nodded once before turning his attention back to the ship.

“Claire, is it?” he asked, “Well, Claire, this proud maiden you see taking shape before you is the Victory, the first new vessel to grace the docks since the Calamity. We may have lost the bulk of our ships that fateful day, but starting with this beauty, we will restore the Maelstrom’s fleet to its former glory.”

Though she didn’t ask, she could see that he was all but bursting with pride to tell someone of his work. She listened on with interest as he was admiring every part of the ship in front of them and he told her, “The Victory is more than a simple warship—it is the symbol of Limsa Lominsa’s rebirth from the wreckage of the Seventh Umbral Era. Thus we are striving to complete her construction as swiftly as possible, even going so far as to hire veteran shipwrights from outside the thalassocracy.”

“So that should mean that it will be finished soon?” Claire asked, trying to be polite.

He turned back to her, and added with a slight warning, “Yet even with such unprecedented measures, there are never enough hands to handle the abundance of tasks. Should you choose to linger at the docks for a time, there is no end of odd jobs for a hardworking adventurer.”

The fact that he spoke the word hardworking longer and slower than the rest of his sentence did not pass over her. She was understanding what he was getting out. There was work for her and she was free to come and go so long as she made herself useful.

“Be you fair warned—there is no place here for layabouts and troublemakers,” he finished as she nodded.

Not wanting to give him a reason to throw her out, she content herself for the next two days running about the drydocks, looking for anyone who needed help. The people were all too happy to have someone lend them aid, and took her in gratefully.

During that time, she learned that everyone seemed to be… slightly afraid of Ahtbyrm. She wasn’t sure why though… sure he was gruff and not the most sociable person she knew, but he didn’t seem like a bad person to her.

Perhaps, he seemed to sense her thoughts; for he never told her off whenever she came by to see the Victory. Mayhaps he even liked having someone else appreciate the beauty of the ship like he was… even more so when she told him that she had only recently taken up the hammer at the guilds in Limsa.

He was even good enough to give her advice.

“Now, even the smallest pieces of your materials are important,” he instructed her. “If you put as much effort into the materials as you do into creating the whole project, then not only will it make it easier, you will have created a true piece of art after putting all that care into it.”

Usually, he would stop talking after such phrases… as if he was worried about being seen as having a gentle side.

Yet, one time, when she went to speak with him, she heard him muttering to himself. It wasn’t the usual kind of mutterings, like he was complaining about one of his workers or how he could improve some part of the ship. Today, he was sounding worried.
“Where in the seven hells in that man?!” he grumbled, “Not once in twelve moons has he been late with a shipment, and now two whole turns of the sun without a single word.”

“What is wrong?” she asked, having appeared behind him and making him jump.

“A shipwright of mine—a young man named Fyrilsmyd—recently left Candlekeep Quay to retrieve several crates of supplies ordered from Limsa Lominsa… but has yet to return,” he explained, looking mildly annoyed that she had this habit of sneaking up on him. “I have sent several missives to Haldbroda, but his replies are always the same. He does not recall ever seeing the wright, nor the supplies he was scheduled to collect. That man knows something, and I severely doubt he is telling me the whole truth.”

He sighed and added, “As I cannot leave my post, I would ask you to travel to Candlekeep Quay in my stead and inform Haldbroda that if he insists on playing these games, I will personally see that he is transferred to Turtleback Island, where he can rot alone in the middle of the sea for eternity.”

She was a little surprised that he would ask her to do this, but she nodded in agreement and headed off on her own. Candlekeep Quay was a small port that was southeast of the Drydocks, and was the port that kept watch over all ships that came past this area. When she arrived, she questioned the guard named Haldbroda, making sure to repeat the threat that Ahtbyrm said and, believing her, he quickly told her all that he knew, though it wasn’t much. But she did get a direction, and she began to walk the path to the Salt Strand where she could see the giant blue crystals jutting out wildly—where it looked like one could actually walk upon the water.

She found the wright hiding behind some boulders, looking waterlogged and beaten, jumping in fear when he saw her. After explaining she was here on behave of Ahtbyrm, she could see the relief in his face as he quickly explained that while he was getting the cargo, he was shipwrecked and he was too afraid to return without the supplies. She could see the problem here, for this area was an encampment to a rough tribe of Qiqirn, who attacked anything that drew too close. And from this distance, she could make out that they seemed to have fished out some of the cargo from the sea and were holding onto it.

Knowing that the wright would be attacked if he drew too close, she took a stealthier approach, only fighting when she had to, and was able to steal away all the pieces of cargo with minimal damage. After returning the supplies to the wright, he thanked her whole-hearted, promising that he would return after he rests and pays his respects to the family of the sailor who he had sent out to sea with in the first place.

After journeying back to the docks, she informed Ahtbyrm of everything the shipwright told her. Of the storm that shipwrecked them and how he had been worried he would be blamed for the loss of supplies. After hearing that he was alive and well, she could see the relief in his face.

“I am relieved to hear that both Fyrilsmyd and the supplies are unharmed, though it was foolish for him to believe that I would blame him for that which was obviously out of his hands,” Ahtbyrm told her.

“It was not his fault that a storm appeared like that,” she agreed, but was surprised to see him shake his head.

“You see, there was no storm that day, and the sea here adjacent the Drydocks were as calm as a slumbering child,” he told her and she tilted her head in confusion as he explained, “This leads me to believe that the trouble the ships encountered off Candlekeep Quay was of a less natural sort—the sort which the Sahagin have been known to conjure.”
He looked her up and down for a moment before saying, “Claire. While I originally had doubts about your motives, you have repeatedly proven yourself an asset to Naldiq & Vymelli’s. I still do not like you, but that does not mean I do not trust you.”

She wasn’t sure if she should be flattered or not.

“Ghimthota, head of the watch here at the Drydocks, believes that pirates may be plotting an attack on the Victory, and she requires assistance investigating a group of unsavory individuals making camp nearby,” he went on, pointing over her head to another direction, “I have recommended you for the task. Despite all Limsa Lominsa endured before, during, and following the Calamity, the fact that there are still those who would turn their backs on the city-state so that they might line their pockets with a few handfuls of coin… Just the thought of it sickens me.”

She nodded and he turned away, as if embarrassed to keep talking.

She set off towards Ghimthota, having seen her a few times during her stay here, and introduced herself—explaining that Ahtbyrm sent her to her to help.

“Ah, yes,” Ghimthota said, observing her through a critical eye, “I had a feeling you would be the one Ahtbyrm sent. Since you first arrived at the Moraby Drydocks, I have had my men watch you.”

For what? What did she do to warrant that?

“Oh, there’s no need to get angry,” Ghimthota said reassuringly as she waved her hand at her, “I make it a point to keep an eye on all those new to the area. It is simply protocol. And you’ll be pleased to know that nothing… incriminating was found. You appear to be a model citizen.”

She didn’t like the way that she said ‘appeared’. Still, she stayed quiet as she went on, “That, and the foreman seems to think somewhat highly of you… which I must admit is quite shocking. The man doesn’t even trust his own mother.”

It seemed to be trait with the Lominsans to compliment someone with an insult mixed in.

“Very well, then. I assume Ahtbyrm informed you of what your task would entail,” Ghimthota said, “The pirates we believe are conspiring to raid the Drydocks were last seen breaking camp near an ancient stone called the mark of the Spinner. I would have you approach the men, posing as a lost adventurer, and see if you cannot somehow learn of their intentions. C’nangho stationed at the rear gates can provide you with an exact location of the camp.”

The guard named C’nangho laughed happily when she saw her, having quietly explained that she put a bet on her that Ahtbyrm would recommend her for this new job. After drooling at the idea of salmon for dinner tonight, she cleared her throat and informed her that if she followed the road past the gates to the southeast, she would come across a barren cape with a large stone half-buried in the cliff. This was supposed to be a holy place that was dedicated to Nymeia, the Spinner.

So, after centering herself, she walked down the dirt road until she was carried over to the edge of the cliffs to where she spotted the stone… a faint image of a spinning wheel engraved upon the smooth surface. While a short distance away, was a small band of pirates sitting around a fire as they drank.

So, making sure that she had her weapon close at hand, she went down the cliff to question them.

She approached the largest of them, a Roegadyn with a patch over one eye, and stunk of stale ale. He gazed up at her warningly with his one blood-shot eye as she politely said to him that she had
lost her way and if he knew where the nearest Levemete was.

Almost as if she had given him great offense, he began venting his anger as he ranted, “I’m givin’ ye to the count of nine to step back on that path, and carry yer ‘venturin’ arse back down to whatever rock it is ye crawled out from under.”

He took a long sip of his bottle, before realizing that it was empty, and tossed it aside with a grunt of disgust.

The disreputable pirate turned his drunken gaze back to her, as if it was her fault for all of the trouble they’ve had recently and barked, “Ye see, I’s ‘ad it up to me ears with yer type, roamin’ the ‘ills like they was yers to roam. It’s getting’ to be that a man cannæ enjoy a mug ‘o rum wivout some shite-breath outlander runnin’ up askin’ which is the wise to the local levemete. Seven ‘ells if I know! I’m a bloody pirate, godsdammit!”

Well, if nothing else, that confirmed that they were pirates.

“Thal's balls!” he went on, not caring what he was saying to her at this point, “Once we ‘ave me boy back, I’m puttin’ this godsforsaken piss’ole of an island so far behind me, ain’t no one’ll remember I was ever ‘ere.”

He then got up and barked to his men, who were looking green and were swaying alarmingly, “Come on, scrags. We’s knives to sharpen.”

He led them away as they stumbled behind him, looking like they were either going to throw up or pass out before they took more than twenty paces.

Deciding not to stick around and see which they would do, she returned to the Drydocks, quickly locating Ghimthota and told her everything that they said.

“So the trespassers are indeed pirates,” Ghimthota said thoughtfully once she listened to everything Claire said, “And they are indeed planning something. But what is this talk of getting ‘me boy back’?”

Claire shrugged, not sure how to answer that as Ghimthota frowned and said, “Something is not right, and I won’t sit by idly waiting for those pirates to make the first move. I shall order increased patrols immediately. Thank you again for your help, Claire. It appears we were wise to put our trust in you.”
**The Lominsan Envoy**

Chapter Summary

With danger seemingly jumping out of the woodworks, one would think that the world was against you. But it seems that rewards are finally starting to come to a new adventurer. But with visions beginning to haunt her and new responsibilities being given, it's a lot to take in at once. For how does one go from a simple adventurer to a Envoy?

“I am concerned, Claire,” Ghimthota said anxiously, her tough facade fading as she thought over everything she just heard. “It appears that the pirates I had you investigate are on the move. They creep ever closer to the Drydocks, so I must assume they mean to target the Victory herself. We must apprehend them before they put their plans into motion! And you, Clare, are just the woman to do it.”

Seriously? Her? She was not a trained Yellowjacket or Maelstrom member so why would she feel that she could trust her to get the job done?

“Without your capable assistance, if ear the security of the Drydocks cannot be guaranteed. Not moments ago, my guards submitted reports of suspicious activity in the area,” Ghimthota went on, not paying attention to Claire’s unspoken thoughts, “Pray begin your efforts by listening to one of their accounts firsthand. Any suspect saboteurs you encounter during the course of your investigation are to be interrogated. Report any and all findings directly to me.”

Well, that seemed reasonable to her. She went out to speak with the guards stationed on the outside of the entrances to the Drydocks and spoke with them to see if they had seen or heard anything odd. They told her that they had seen a few pirates lurking around the cliffs near Empty Heart… a spot just overlooking all of the Drydocks. So, she decided to climb up the side of the cliff to see if she could find anything there that could tell her what was going on. To her surprise, she found a rather shifty-eyed sailor standing there—his eyes upon the mostly completed Victory below him.

“Excuse me?” she called and approached him politely, on the off chance that he was one of the shipwrights. But as soon as he turned and saw her, she knew that he was one of these pirates.

“Bah, spotted me, did ye?” the mangy-looking sailor barked, “Well, yer too late—what’s to ‘appen is already ‘appennin’.”

Well, at least that saved her the trouble of getting a confession out of him. She watched him run off before she returned to Ghimthota and quickly told her what she saw and what the pirate said.

“So, you found me one of those pirates, did you?” she asked after Claire finished explaining, “But what could these knaves be planning? ‘What’s to happen is already happening’…?”

Claire honestly couldn’t tell her. She shrugged, glancing up at the sky to see that it would be dark in a few hours. She was just wondering if she should head back to Limsa early for the day when…?

“Captain!” cried a pained voice, “Trouble… at the shipyard…”
They both looked up to see one of the Maelstrom soldiers running over to them, panting hard and clutching at a wound in his side before he fell to his knees in front of them.

“Easy now, soldier,” Ghimthota said urgently, “Who did this to you?”

“Pirates…” he panted, “Out of nowhere…” he then coughed violently where Claire could see a few drops of blood fall onto his gloved hand, “Struck me good…”

“Gods below, we are not prepared for this! The pirates, soldier, how many do they number?” Ghimthota demanded.

“Not sure…” he wheezed, “More than I could quickly count… seemed to be carrying… explosives…”

“Explosives!?” she gasped, “Then there is no time to lose!”

Claire could see right away what she was going to ask when her wild eyes turned to her.

“Claire, you heard the situation,” she said urgently, “Make your way to the shipyard and engage these intruders! I will see to this man’s wounds, then follow after. Make haste, now!”

With the idea that there were explosives waiting for them if they didn’t hurry caused her to push any thoughts of saying no out of her mind. She turned and began to race along the Drydocks, keeping an eye out for any pirates as she ran in the same the direction the soldier stumbled from earlier.

It wasn’t long before she came across some bowmen and was forced to deal with them before moving down into where the supplies were being kept for the ships. After passing by a few more injured Maelstrom members, she spotted a handful of bowmen rushing at them. She ordered her Carbuncle ahead of her to continue the fight while she danced around the arrows, striking them down with magic, before she ran up one more flight of stairs so that she was at the foot of where the Victory stood.

She stopped dead when she saw two people already there. One of them was the same rude pirate captain that she spoke to at the cliff before… and the other was Ahtbyrm, who was now tied up with his hands behind his back, and on the ground while he sported a black eye.

“Never reckoned it’d be this easy!” the captain laughed at him, “Still don’t trust those slimy bastards, but their plan worked like a charm!”

“Da!” Ahtbyrm shouted as he glared up at him, fighting his bounds, “What are you doing, you great bloody fool!?"

Well, this was awkward. No wonder Ahtbyrm seemed disturbed at the thought of pirates lurking outside these walls.

“Shut yer trap, boy,” he barked, “This’ll all be over soon. All that’s left now is to blow this ugly pile o’ driftwood into splinters.”

Ahtbyrm looked to the Victory in panic before crying, “Why would you do such a thing!? Have you any idea how important this ship is? What it represents?”

“Aye, an’ that’s what makes it all the sweeter! Whatever it takes to knock some sense into me treacherous, backstabbin’ son!” the pirate barked back, “the pirate yelled back drunkenly.

“Imagine, a boy o’ mine givin’ up the pirate life to become a shipwright! An’ buildin’ a bleedin’
Maelstrom vessel at that! What under Llymlaen’s wide, green ocean made ye take up with these self-righteous shites!?”

“You’re the one with no blood sense, Da!” Ahtbyrm yelled back, pleading with him to understand, “Don’t you see? The pirates had their glory days, but that era is over!”

Alright, she had heard enough. She was about to go marching in there herself when Ghimthota caught up to them with a handful of soldiers right behind her.

“Ah!” she gasped, clearly having heard that last part, “I wondered why Ahtbyrm never spoke of his father. I never would have thought…”

At the sound of her voice, the pirate captain spun around and glared at them as he declared, “This ship’s a symbol alright—of everthin’ what went wrong with the world. An’ I mean to shatter it into a hunnerd thousand pieces!”

She suddenly heard laughing and looked up to see that there was a group of pirates hanging out on the deck as they waved and clapped at them, as if they were in a parade.

“Ghimthota! Claire!” Ahtbyrm cried, his eyes wide at the sight of them and pleaded, “Pray beat the tar out of this bloated sea slug, and make sure no harm comes to the Victory!”

A true craftsman. Not caring about his own safety, only that of his creation. Well, who was she to judge? That was when the captain ran towards them with his axe drawn.

“Da, this is madness!” Ahtbyrm pleaded.

“A pirate don’t abandon ‘is treasures!” he yelled back as he led his crew behind them and a full attack was on.

“My father…” Ahtbyrm said, “You must stop him!”

“Leave him to us,” Ghimthota declared as she called, “Claire, C’nangho, to me!”

Claire moved this way and that, avoiding more arrows that were fired her way, all the while dancing around the slashing of an axe that was almost as large as she was. Thankfully for her, the lackeys weren’t that tough… most fell after a few hits from the soldiers, and she was able to work with poisoning a few with her bio and miasma spells before striking them with a Ruin right afterwards.

“As we agreed, Ahtzapfyn!” groaned out another voice and she looked up in time to see what looked like an enormous lizardman with razor-sharp teeth, scales covering every ilm of his body, and a long tail that was as thick as an oak trunk. He held up a staff of a heavy wood and began to lead a handful of his fellows right behind him as they roared out.

“Mamool Ja mercenaries!” C’nangho cried at the sight of them.

“I’ll take the Mamool Ja,” Ghimthota yelled, running forward to face the lizardmen, “You focus on Ahtzapfyn.”

Which seemed to be fair to her. Claire went back to her job of dealing with pirate lackeys while making sure that her Carbuncle was doing it’s hardest to keep Ahtzapfyn busy. At first, the old pirate did his best to ignore the tiny, blue creature that was nipping at his heels. But soon, he realized that the furry beast was not leaving him alone and was beginning to draw blood from its sharp teeth and range of spells.
One by one, they managed to deal with the pirates and even the Mamool Ja before all that was left was this one pirate.

“Ye’ve no idea who yer up against!” he yelled as Claire stepped forward, watching his every move as she moved about.

“’Ware, Adventurer!” C’nangho cried, “Ahtzapfyn has a crazy glint in his eye…”

It was here that something strange happened. She could see, almost in her mind’s eye what he was planning. Just before he brought his axe down… she could see a sort of glowing image of where the attack was going to hit. She saw it in the form of a cone-shape area that was directly in front of Ahtzapfyn. Without pausing to think, she moved so that she was standing outside the ‘area’ of the attack.

“No, outta me damn way!” he brought his axe down… only to realize that he had missed her because of her last second of dodging.

“Please! You cannot let him win!” Ahtbyrm yelled.

Like she was planning on losing? She wasn’t sure what it was that was helping her to see all this, but she could somehow sense where his weapon would fall from that moment on. It didn’t matter where his strikes were coming down, she always seemed to know just where to stand and where not to stand. It didn’t end until she used one last Ruin spell and the pirate fell over backwards… unable to even move.

She brushed her hair out of her face, breathing hard as the soldiers behind her untied Ahtbyrm and were arresting the pirates who were still alive.

She didn’t say another word as she breathed hard, trying to understand what just happened there? She could feel a strange sensation in her fingertips… her blood rushing through her body in a way she couldn’t really understand but enjoyed tremendously. What was happening with her lately? She never felt like this before? Or rather, she couldn’t remember ever feeling these strange sensations of energy and light-headedness before.

But before she could catch her breath, she saw how Ahtbyrm climbed to his feet and stared down with a mixture of sadness and horror in his eyes. Claire didn’t dare say a word as she watched him walk past them and kneel down at his father’s side as the older pirate coughed.

“I… I must be getting’ old, lettin’ some green ‘venturer get the best of me,” Ahtzapfyn wheezed.

“Da…” Ahtbyrm sighed sadly as his father coughed a little more.

“That’s one big bloody ship,” he grunted out as he looked up at the Victory with a new kind of glint in his eyes that Claire wasn’t sure what it was. “Big… an’ nasty lookin’. Ye made that, did ye…?”

He only continued to laugh and wheeze as Claire looked to Ghimthota, who sighed and ordered the others to take him away as well. While it wasn’t certain if he would live from this attack, they would give him a chance to plead his case. Out of respect for Ahtbyrm, if nothing else.

Claire merely stood back as she watched them take him away.

Once she felt that she was back to normal and these foreign feelings faded away, she approached Ahtbyrm from behind.
She didn’t even have to say anything though, for he heard her approach and turned around to face her.

He looked awkward for a moment, as if there was much he wanted to say, but was unable to find the right words for it. Instead, he said, “My thanks, Claire. I shudder to think what may have become of the Victory without your intervention.”

“Are you going to be alright?” she asked softly and he sighed.

“The pirates have made a right mess of things—I’d best get to sorting out the docks,” he stated, “And my thoughts could use some sorting out as well. Ever did my father have a way of turning my life upside down. Pray convey my thanks—and my apologies—to Ghimthota.”

Claire nodded, deciding to leave him alone for now as she returned to Ghimthota and about relayed his words. But as soon as she saw her, Ghimthota let out a happy cry and waved her over so she could greet her properly.

“How fare you, Claire?” she asked, “I cannot begin to thank you for the role you played in preventing this madness. You defended more than a simple ship—you saved the budding hope of Limsa Loinsa from a violent demise. The day was yours. It seems our security regimen will require much in the way of improvement if we are to truly keep the Drydocks safe.”

That was true. She really wasn’t too keen on the idea of early retirement here to the docks as guard duty. But rather than say that, she merely told him everything that Ahtbyrm said.

“…Ahtbyrm apologizes?” she said, startled by this as if she had never thought of such a thing possible. “Well, I suppose I can understand why he would feel responsible for his father’s actions. Of all those involved, this incident was hardest on him. But, in time, I believe he will come to a single conclusion: the most fitting way of moving past his anguish is to see the Victory completed and in the water.”

That was probably the best thing for him right now. He must be feeling guilty over what his father did—or rather almost did at this point. He should focus on seeing the Victory put back out into the water as soon as possible so that he could make up for everything that happened. Or, that was what she believed was going through his mind right now.

“Ah, by the by, the pirates we defeated have been handed over to the Yellowjackets,” she went on, “Reyner’s men will be taking over the investigation. Before the Yellowjackets moved in, however, we recovered a most unusual object. Should you have the time to spare, I would ask of you another favor…”

Claire agreed to this, but Ghimthota said that until everything was finished here, she didn’t feel right asking for anything else. She instead insisted on that she get some rest and tend to any wounds she may have had. Suddenly feeling tired, Claire agreed, having been given a small room to rest up for the night. The Yellowjackets in town felt it was the least that they could reward her with as they thanked her for all that she had done to help them. In fact, she was so tired that when she awoke in the early hours of the morning, she cursed herself for taking so long.

But she had to admit that she felt much recovered from the excitement yesterday and was just getting ready to head back to town when she remembered Ghimthota. When she went to see her again, she saw that the captain looked a little uneasy and she pulled out a rather dirty and crumbled piece of parchment from her pocket. She smoothed it out and held it out for her to look over. She could see a series of strange symbols and markings that she could not make heads or tails from. Just as she was about to ask what this was for, Ghimthota went on speaking.
“Claire,” she said, “In light of your role in recent events, there are few others to whom I would entrust this task. Since last we spoke, a curious missive has been discovered amongst the personal effects of Ahtzapfyn, the pirate behind the plot to sabotage the Victory. This missive was penned in the most unusual script—a script we believe to be some manner of code. Needless to say, anything which a prone enemy of Limsa Lominsa deems worthy of enciphering is like to be of great interest to the Maelstrom. Unfortunately, none among us can make any sense of the message. In cases such as this, I am told the Yellowjackets are wont to turn to Baderon and his convenient… connections. Thus I would have you deliver this missive to the proprietor of the Drowning Wench. Into his hand, and no other, do you understand?”

Well, she could not see why not, especially since she was heading back to the Drowning Wench right now. She nodded, promising that she would make sure that it was seen into his hands. After that, Ghimthola gave her a quick salute and she left… choosing to teleport straight back.

She was really beginning to get the hang of travelling around Limsa and the rest of La Noscea and was just beginning to wonder where her path would take her tomorrow as she headed up to the Drowning Wench.

When she entered the dim pub, she could see that one of the more drunken patrons was singing a rather rude-sounding sea shanty, before she approached the counter where Baderon was looking torn between laughing and having him thrown out.

“Ahoy there, Claire!” he called happily, forgetting about this problem when he saw her, “I’ve been ‘earin’ about your deeds at the Drydocks! Ahtbyrm laid out the entire tale fer me. Poor sod was still reelin’ at ‘is old man’s part in the business, but at least ye kept the Victory from bein’ sunk afore she’d sailed. An’ fer that, I owe ye me thanks!”

Really? Looks like Ahtbyrm really needed a drink after what happened.

“Ye’ve really made a name fer yerself ‘ere in Limsa, lass,” Baderon went on speaking, getting her attention. “Folk know that when they need summat doin’—“

“Perhaps you could help me with something?” she interrupted him suddenly as she pulled out the paper and he raised his eyebrows.

“Oh? You need summat doin’?” he asked, “An’ what might that be?”

She told him about the message that had been found on the pirates that had tried to blow up the Victory, Ghimthota wanted someone to translate it as soon as possible.

“…Ye want someone to read a message writ in funny letters fer ye?” he asked, “An’ Ghimthota thought I might know a man as could? Well, let’s see it, then!”

She handed over the message as he looked over it, turning it this way and that as he tried to make sense of it.

“I reckon I might know a canny bugger what can read stuff like this,” he said after a few minutes. He then gave her a rather wicked grin as he added, “Ugly sod by the name o’ Baderon. Ye know, yer like one o’ me regulars now, Claire. Ye’ve never let me down yet, an’, Navigator ‘elp me, I reckon I can trust ye.” His grin then faded as he went on in a much more serious voice that she almost didn’t recognize from his easy-going attitude, “Ghimthota was right to want this message decipherin’… we’ve got us some trouble brewin’, ‘ere, an’ no mistake. Get ready fer action, an’ I’ll explain.”
She really didn’t like the sound of this as she braced herself for the worst.

“Back when I was younger an’ nastier, I earned me livin’ as a sellsword,” Baderon explained. “In that business, if ye wanted to know what yer enemy was up to, you ‘ad to read the orders ye prized from the cold dead ‘ands of ‘is mates. That’s ‘ow I came to know ‘ow to read yer message. Truth be told, the script was only too bloody familiar. Them’s Sahagin letters, lass. An’ I should know—I’ve gutted more fishback messengers than I can count.”

No wonder no one else could read it. To be honest, she thought that the pirates were just drunk one night and were trying to write down the name of some bar wench one night.

“It gets worse, though…” he added suddenly, “The plan to blow up the Victory is all in ‘ere, right down to the fine details. Looks like they meant to raise eight kinds of ‘ell in western La Noscea, then ‘it the Maelstrom’s new flagship in the confusion. The point bein’, the attack on the Victory weren’t the act of a few rebellious pirates—’twas a key part o’ some canny bastard’s grand plan. But if I’m readin’ this aright, the attack itself came much too early. I’ll wager they panicked when they saw ye was on to ‘em, rushed in to do the job, an’ buggered it up.”

Well, that was starting to make sense why they went ahead with their plan just after she caught that pirate at the cliff. But that still seemed to her a lot of trouble into destroying a single ship.

Apparently, Baderon felt the same way.

“Shee… Them tattoo-faced bastards as they say was payin’ Ahtbyrm’s old man, they’re with the Serpent Reavers, right?” he asked and she nodded, having told him everything ‘slimy bastards’ that Ahtbyrm’s father mentioned before.

“…But none o’ their crew was there, was they?” Baderon questioned and she shook her head, honestly not remembering seeing any of the blue tattoo-faced pirates. “Did they ‘ave summat better to do, or what?”

She was also trying to figure this out—not noticing a pair of white-haired elezen twins watching the two of them for a moment before leaving.

“…Seven ‘ells! I’ve got it all backwards!” Baderon cried with an excited yelp and a snap of his fingers. “That mess at the Victory—that was meant to be the bloody distraction! The fishbacks ain’t interested in the Maelstrom’s baby! They’re after men, just like they’ve always been. They’re sendin’ their pirate lakeys after a civilian target. This bit about raisin’ ‘ell in western La Noscea… that’s where it’ll be. Summat tells me Swiftperch is about to get ‘it, an’ ‘it ‘ard!”

Just great. This was not what any of them needed. She was suddenly about to ask him what they should do when he began to write down note with a rather sloppy hand.

“‘Ere’s a rough translation o’ the message,” he explained, handing it out for her to take, “Take it to Commodore Reyner at the Coral Tower, an’ tell ‘im ‘e’s in fer a busy day. Oh, an’ give ‘im an ‘and, eh? Ye can be dam sure ‘e’ll need one.”

While she wasn’t thrilled at the idea of fighting more pirates, she agreed, already dashing off to Coral Tower, hoping that they would be able to put a stop to this before anything else happened. When she reached the tower of white stone, she was already familiar with everything inside it. This was where the Maurader’s Guild was, and she had begun her lessons in wielding an axe from them. Some of her guildmates were waving to her, thinking she had come in for a new lesson… but she merely shook her head as she was directed to a post to where a rather good-looking, young man stood watching over everyone.
“Yes, I am Reyner,” he said when she approached him, “Ah, you must be the adventurer whose name seems to be on everyone’s lips. You are to be commended for your part in thwarting the plot to destroy the Victory. Now, what can I do for you this day?”

She was a little surprised that he seemed to know about her, but she explained about the letter and that Baderon wanted him to hear about it as soon as possible.

“You bear an urgent message from Baderon? Why do I get the feeling that my hopes for a quiet morning are about to be cruelly dashed?” he asked gloomily, “Tell me, what is afoot?”

After he reads the message, she could see the color drain from his face.

“An assault on Swiftperch!?” he gasped in horror at what he just learned, “But we’ve seen nothing to suggest the Serpent Reavers are massing for an attack.”

She explained more about what happened at the Drydocks and she saw how Reyner’s disbelief became more thoughtful.

“Even so, it would be foolish to discount the possibility—Baderon is rarely wrong about such matters,” Reyner agreed, “I will marshal the Yellowjackets for battle immediately. The only questions where to send them. While I concur with Baderon’s assessment that the attack on the Drydocks was intended as a diversion, Swiftperch is but one of several possible targets for the main thrust.”

It was as if the gods had heard him and his answer came in the form of another Yellowjacket.

“Commodore, sir!” he cried, barely stopping long enough to spring into a salute.

“Report!” Reyner commanded, turning his full attention to him.

“It’s the Sahagin, sir!” he called, “They’ve mounted a large-scale assault on the South Tidegate, and threaten to overwhelm our defenses within the day. The garrison requests immediate reinforcements.”

“By the Navigator… it seems my decision has been made for me,” Reyner groaned out before ordering, “Muster the troops and give the order to march.”

“The Serpent Reavers are working with the Sahagin?” she questioned once the Yellowjacket dashed off with his orders.

“Aye, the Serpent Reavers are in league with the Sahagin,” Reyner confirmed, looking back to her. “Which means there is every chance this assault on the Tidegate may yet prove to be another feint. The fact remains, however, that we can ill afford to ignore it. And that leaves Swiftperch vulnerable to those pirate traitors. It is at times such as these that I wish the Warriors of Light yet walked among us. But wishes will avail us naught.”

He then looked at her up and down before deciding, “Faye, you must serve in their absence. Make for Swiftperch with all haste and lend your strength to the squads I can spare for the settlement’s defense.”

She would do it. She wanted to help in any way she could. But her? As a Warrior of Light?

She couldn’t help but laugh at such a thought. Who would ever expect her to rise to such a title as a Warrior of Light?
She quickly made her way back to Swiftperch to where she spotted a Yellowjacket standing guard, looking around fiercely. When she approached him, he looked taken aback by her until he said, “Commodore Reyner sent word we’d be getting reinforcements, but I didn’t expect him to send you!”

She looked at him in confusion as he adds, “You certainly look like you’ve seen your share of action, though—you bear little resemblance to the wide-eyed whelp I met fresh of the ferry.”

She blinked in understanding, realizing that this was the same Yellowjacket she saw before when she first arrived in Limsa. He was the one who directed her to the Drowning Wench, and she could see the hint of a grin when he saw her eyes widen.

“In any case, do you know what you’re fighting for here? This place—Swiftperch—it was rebuilt by folk who stood strong in the face of every hardship the Calamity threw their way,” he told her. “And we’re not about to let some fish-fancying scum claim the honor of being the ones who finally broke their spirits. Don’t give those pirate bastards one bloody ilm, you hear me?”

She nodded as she gathered with the other Yellowjackets as they stood their ground near the entrance to the small settlement. They were giving orders for everyone here to get back in their homes and not to come out no matter what happened out here, with only a few stragglers left outside by the time that they realized they weren’t alone anymore.

“Here they come!” a Yellowjacket called Glazrael cried out in warning.

At the cry, the few citizens near the gates turned to see a large group of pirates marching in towards them. With fear in their faces, they all backed off, running straight for their homes as the large group marched right in, looking both surprised and irritated at the sight of the Yellowjackets standing against them.

There had to be at least ten of them walking in, dressed in dirty clothes, masks and bandanas, with weapons ready to be drawn. Almost all of them had blue tattoos on their faces as they looked about with evil grins, almost a hungry look in their eyes that she didn’t like. Claire’s eyes strayed over them all, and though she couldn’t be sure, the one standing out front with half his face panted blue looked to be the same one she had seen before when he tried to kill Sevrin.

“’Ere now, I thought all them Yellowjackets worms was meant to be busy,” she overheard one of the deckhands said, “That useless scrag ain’t followed the plan, ’as ‘e?”

“Now what?” another asked, “Pull back and wait for our Sahagin brothers?”

“Piss on that!” their leader laughed, waving his hand at such a thought, “We ain’t turnin’ back empty-handed! Remember, no killin’ the smallfolk, or it’ll be your blood what stains Lord Leviathan’s altars! The yellow-bellies ye can butcher at will! Them dirt-eatin’ slugs’ll be crushed under the full might o’ the Serpent Reavers!”

She felt her eyes narrow as a sort of power began to race through her blood again. She cracked her neck, readying herself for what was coming.

“Seems Swiftperch was the main target after all, eh?” Ryssfloh said from next to her before he ordered, “Squads One and Two, protect the townsfolk! Squad Three, you’re our rear guard! The rest of you—we meet their charge where we stand! Let us bear the commodore word of our victory, or no word at all!”

“For Limsa Lominsa!” the Yellowjacket Infantry cried out as she pulled her grimoire out and
flicked it up with a flick of her wrist.

They charged ahead, meeting them halfway as their leader laughed out, “Rargh! I’ll gut all you yellow-bellies an’ dance on yer gizzards!”

Easier said than done. For these guys were holding their own as they blocked them, preventing them from going in any further.

“Leave no pirate scum standing!” Ryssfloh barked out orders over the sounds of their fights, “Show ’em how a Yellowjacket fights!”

Glazrael laughed before yelling, “Time to split some heads, adventurer! Let’s start with the frontline fodder!”

Well, the few who were out in front were simple enough… so over-confident that they would be able to march over them with no trouble, they didn’t relaize that they were being flattened until it was too late. While most of the Yellowjackets focused on the leader of this group, a handful dealt with the lackies. Knowing that their numbers did give them a slight advantage, she decided to level the playing field by fighting the weaker ones first. The first wave was taken care quiet easily as she turned her attention back to the pirate leader, taking most of his attacks. That was when it happened again… the strange visions coming to her of where and when their attacks were about to hit. She was able to move backwards and forwards as he rained down all manner of attacks on her, and she could see his frustration quickly growing.

“More of the bastards?!” Come on then!” Ryssfloh yelled, and he led the charge against this new wave as she stood against the main threat on her own. While the others dealt with the lackies this time, she moved about and continued to weaken her main target. Once he was startign to see that he was losing ground, she saw his cocky grin fade to a snarl as he declared, “All right, ye scurvy bastards… Here’s a trick to make ye soil yer breeches!”

She wasn’t sure what he was talking about until he moved back and held his arms up as he cried out, “ Dweller o’ the Abyss, yer master calls! Heed me words an’ smite me foes!”

Almost at once, she saw what he was doing… this was the same thing that happened with that masked mage right before he summoned a golem to attack her. She tried to silence him as she dashed forward… but it was too late.

Up through a dark, purplish haze sprang a terrible creature. Thin, skeletal with bat-like wings rose up from the haze as a jaw of razor-sharp teeth started slashing at her. She moved back to avoid its claws as she was now standing with an enemy on either side of her.

“Is that a bloody voidsent?” Ryssfloh cried, from somewhere behind her, “Hold steady, lads!”

Easier said than done as she focused on weakening both of her foes, knowing that she had to deal with the pirate first.

“Keep on pummeling him!” Glazrael yelled encouragingly from on her right as she jumped in to help shield her from the blows, “He can’t take much more of this!”

No sooner did she say that she did bring the pirate down, leaving him in a bloody mess at her feet before she spun about, her robes spinning around as if from a great wind as she cast her spells and concentrated on the voidsent. In fact, she was so aggressive that the Yellowjackets were taken aback and even staring as she fought it… eventually casting a spell powerful enough to crack through the shell-like skin and watched as it crumbled… vanishing in a puff of black haze.
“Well fought—the Reavers are beaten and scattered,” Ryssfloh praised once everything settled down as she was breathing hard as she stood there, feeling her blood singing once again in a strange sensation she wasn’t sure she liked.

She set her weapon back at her side as she looked about to see the grins upon the rest of the Yellowjackets faces. Already they were tying up the few Serpent Reavers that were still breathing on the ground, and some where even looking about as if they were hoping for more.

“I’ll take some men and hunt down the stragglers,” Ryssfloh said to her, “Oh, but there may be more of them lurking about, so don’t let your guard down just yet.”

She nodded as she wiped at her brow, only to realize that she didn’t even break a sweat. Strange…?

But she watched as Ryssfloh left with the rest of the Yellowjackets as she was left alone. She sighed in relief as she looked around, realizing how alone she was. The citizens were either locked inside their homes or had been evacuated, and as far as she could feel… there was no one around her. She was just imagining just teleporting back to Limsa when…?

It happened so suddenly that she was almost knocked over at it. She could feel something… Wasn’t right. Almost like a certain shadow was watching just behind her. She spun about, seeing nothing, but that sensation remained… at least until she saw a figure walk out from behind the aetheryte crystal.

At first, she thought that someone was coming out from the house… but then she realized that this was the same masked mage she saw before back in the canyon.

She stared at him as she heard him mutter, staring at her with that blank, black mask, “The source of his strength becomes clear…”

“Who are you?” she questioned, moving sideways, not liking this at all—and though she couldn’t see his face—she didn’t like how he was looking at her.

“You may have bested the golem, but you will not fare so well this day,” the masked mage said, not answering her question. Without warning, a strange red symbol appeared over the mask and he was suddenly surrounded by a black light. She stepped backwards, staring at this thick cloud of darkness that rose up from his body and before she knew it, the entire sky had turned black with a violet color mixed in. She wasn’t understanding what was going on as she stared back at the mage, who was chanting.

“O, mournful voice of creation!” he chanted, calling the darkness to him, “Send unto me a creature of the abyss, my thrall to command that I may smite mine enemies!”

He threw his arms wide as a creature rose up and out of the darkness that pooled on the ground. It was a large, gargoyle-like creature… with its wings were spread wide when it held up a pair of blades that looked as if they were made from bones and skin. It hissed and snarled at her as the masked man said, “Your very being imperils the plan. You cannot be suffered to live.”

Without thinking about it, she drew her grimoire once more and summoned her carbuncle to her side once more as she dodged the swinging blade.

“Soon, you shall take your vile gifts to the grave!” he cried as she ducked and moved, causing poison to enter it’s body as it continued to swing its blades around wildly at her. She was more than able to keep up with it as she dodged and moved around. She was able to keep up with it for a surprisingly long time, long enough for the masked mage to realize that he was no longer in
“Whence springs this preternatural might!” he gasped as she jumped backwards to miss another attack and cast two Ruin spells one after the other. She could see the creature growing tired and weakening until a stone came flying over her head and struck at it, causing it to cry in pain as she finished the final Ruin spell, which brought it down. She stared behind her to see, to her astonishment, was that it was Y’shtola who had come running over to help.

“Where did…?” she began as she stood next to her.

“A fearsome opponent… against whom you shall not stand alone!” Y’shtola panted as she ran ahead with her, healing a deep cut in Claire’s arm as they stood against the mage.

“An unwelcome guest,” the masked mage growled in fury at the sight of them, “No matter, all shall fall before me!”

But he barely paid any attention to Y’shtola, who was focusing on healing her, while he fired his attacks directly at Claire. But after a while, she could almost feel the fear he felt as he gasped, “No mortal should possess such strength!”

“His power wanes!” Y’shtola called encouragingly, “Afford him no chance to recover!”

At last, she ducked after the final blow before she caused one last spell to strike him right in the chest…

He staggered backwards from the attack, and she felt him struggle for air before he fell to his knees.

“That the wisdom of the Paragons should be brought low…” she heard him croak as he collapsed, “…by mere mortals…”

Both of them could do nothing more than look down at the lifeless body.

“Paragons, did he say?” Y’shtola gasped from beside her, “Then it is as I feared.” Claire looked to her as she added thoughtfully, “They are known as the Bringers of Chaos… or Ascians, to give them their proper name. It would seem our suspicions were correct—it is they who have been manipulating the beast tribes.”

Claire then asked her, “Have you Sharlayans encounter them before?”

“Pardon?” Y’shtola questioned, looking back at her with confusion, “You would know if we Sharlayans have encountered Ascians before? …I have never spoken to you of my homeland. How did you know whence I hail?” Claire realized her mistake and opened her mouth, wondering how she could possibly explain the ‘vision’ that she had before. But before she could, Y’shtola’s eyes widen in understanding and a hint of a smile even appeared as she said, “Wait, I do begin to see. You have been blessed with a special gift.”

Claire blinked, not sure what to say with that. She wanted to ask what she meant, if she knew just what this—thing—that was happening to her. Yet, that was when the Yellowjackets returned, all of them pale and unsteady as they rushed over to check on them.

“Are you all right, lass?” Ryssfloh asked urgently, looking over her to make sure that she was alright, “If I’d known a mean bugger like that was hiding in the bushes, I would’ve left a squad or six to keep you company.”
She nodded, letting him know that she was in one piece. That was when they all turned their attention to the still form of the masked mage—this Ascian—who remained dead on the ground.

“Well, at least now we can call this kidnapping investigation to a close,” Ryssfloh said in relief, “Those Reavers were the ones spiriting folk away in the dead of night, and this bastard here was pulling all the strings.”

“A trifle simplistic, but not inaccurate,” Y’shtola said as she folded her arms, continuing to watch with a slightly suspicious look. Perhaps she just imagined seeing it though because she shook her head and went on, “I came as soon as I sensed his presence, but I never thought to find such a scene of carnage. Yet we prevailed. And thanks to your heroic actions, I have learned much.”

“Aye, ‘heroic’ is the word, I don’t want to think about what would’ve happened if you hadn’t been there, friend,” Ryssfloh said to Claire as the rest of the Yellowjackets all began to leave, taking the Ascian and the pirates—either dead or living—and walked right past them. Ryssfloh then bowed low to Y’shtola as he added, “And your assistance is much appreciated, too, Lady Y’shtola. Please give our regards to the Scions.”

Scions? What were they? She didn’t ask though as she watched him leave and Y’shtola turned to her, looking ready to leave and return to her duties as well.

“I am glad to have played a role in bringing what I hope is an end to the disturbing spate of abductions,” she said kindly before looking her up and down again. “The thread of your fate forms a part of a most intriguing tapestry. Mayhap we will be afforded the chance to speak more in the near future. For now, however, you must see this particular tale to its conclusion. Pray send my greetings to Commodore Reyner.”

Then, with a wave, she left with a shrewd smile. Claire sighed, feeling more confused than before, getting ready to teleport away…

When something caught her eye.

It was some dark light glinting in her sight and she looked to see something lying in the grass a few yalms away. Turning to look at it, she realized that this thing was encased with the same dark energy that the Ascian had used before to summon that gargoyle. She took a few steps closer and realized that it was all coming from a crystal that was such a dark shade of violet that it was almost black. Unlike the blue one that she was still carrying with her, this one sent chills up her spin. As she watched it though, she saw it shatter apart and vanish in a puff of black and purple smoke.

And leaving with it was that feeling of unease.

She didn’t speak another word as she made her way back to Limsa, heading straight back to the Coral Tower to check up on Reyner and let him know what happened. As she walked in, she was greeted by the applause of the Yellowjackets and even a few clapping her on the shoulder as she made her way up to greet the Commodore.

“Faye, eagerly have I awaited your return!” Reyner cried, grinning widely at the sight of her. “Word of your exploits is already spreading through the ranks. My troops and I owe you a great debt of gratitude for your timely assistance. You have shown yourself to be possessed of a sure arm, a strong spirit, and sound judgement. Would that Limsa Lominsa had more of your like.”

“T-Thank you,” she stuttered suddenly, feeling a warm blush tint her cheeks as he went on, as if not hearing her, “I have little doubt that you shall one day join the ranks of Eorzea’s greatest adventurers. It is but a matter of time. Clearly, Baderon’s eye for potential remains as sharp as
ever, though I doubt even he imagined you capable of such feats. Might you favor me with your own account of the day’s events? Such victories bear retelling!”

“Well, I…” she began, but soon, she had no choice but to tell them all that she knew. She was surrounded on all sides by Yellowjackets, who wanted to hear about the battle from her point of view, and she sort of… had to tell them every little detail that she could remember. But even after that, it seemed that they were still wanting more information.

When she reached the point where Y’shtola jumped in to help her battle the masked mage, a few of them laughed at Y’shtola doing something like that.

“Y’shtola has been working with us for quite some time, you see,” Reyner explained to her good-naturedly, “And she was only too willing to assist the Yellowjackets in the kidnapping investigation, proving herself a stalwart ally of Limsa Lominsa yet again. Needless to say, after your part in thwarting the attempted sabotage of the Victory, and the small matter of your deeds at Swiftperch, you too have proven yourself a valued friend of the thalassocracy.”

Well, at least it all ended on a good note.

“All the Yellowjackets saluted the moment they saw her and Reyner called to them all, “May I present to you Admiral Blowefhiswyn.”

She was tall Roegadyn woman with pale bluish skin and short white hair that was swept backwards as if a strong sea breeze had just blew it back. She was dressed in a long, low-cut black coat and boots with white cuffs and gloves, while on each of her shoulders were red decorations that resembled the flag that represented Limsa Lominsa as she walked in with her head held high and proud that commanded all attention. As she walked in, she noticed that Reyner went to stand right behind her and besides the Roegadyn soldier who had entered besides her.

The Admiral glanced down with a stern, yet kind looking expression as she stated, “So this is the adventurer I’ve been reading about in the field reports.” Claire didn’t have time to say anything before the Admiral introduced herself, “I am Merlwyb Bloefhiswyn, Admiral of Limsa Lominsa.” She then smiled and said, “On behalf of my people, I bid you thanks for the deeds you have done this day.”

Again, without waiting for an answer, the Admiral held up her hand imperiously as the Roegadyn who had walked in with her, and held out something for her to take. Claire could tell that the Admiral was not a woman who beat around the bush.

“A token of our gratitude,” Admiral Merlwyb said, “What worth is high regard without just reward, after all? Ha!”

Claire decided, that she liked her. She gratefully took the small object and gazed at it to see that it was a ring made of silver and a bright red stone that glinted in the light. She thanked them as she put it onto her finger before the Admiral went on.

“Since you first set foot in our city, my good friend Baderon and Commodore Reyner have taken turns at regaling me with tales of your exploits,” she said, “Safe to say, they left an impression. Join me at the coming banquet. A seat of honor at the celebratory feast is the least I can offer the woman who foiled the Sahagin.”

Admiral!” a random Yellowjacket yelled, getting their attention and they all turned at once to see a few people walk inside. Claire had heard many story since being in Limsa Lominsa of the Admiral, who had once been a pirate herself before she took command. And she could see why.
The Yellowjackets behind her all gasped at that as Reyner nodded, both impressed and a little taken aback.  

“Oh, and don’t be late,” Merlwyb told her with a slight tease in her voice. “Your fellow guests will be eager to take the measure of their newest hero, and some do not take kindly to being kept waiting. Till then, may you walk in the light of the Crystal.”

She heard the Yellowjackets salute once again behind her as the Admiral turned and left the same way she came in. By taking everyone by surprise.

Claire wasn’t too sure what happened, but judging from everyone else’s expressions, this was a good thing.

“I am not sure you understand just how unusual it is for the Admiral to invite an adventurer to a state banquet,” Reyner said, turning her around to look at him. “It is a highly coveted honor. Why, even the officers under her direct command are rarely afforded such recognition! But I will not deny you have earned it,” he added suddenly. “Many of the tasks you have performed in service to the thalassocracy have been both difficult and dangerous. This is a reward for all of your efforts—a nod to your many achievements, both large and small. Has the enormity of this moment yet to sink in? Perchance you will realize its significance when you stand before the assembled dignitaries of Limsa Lominsa! …And now that I have imagined the scene, I realize that you will require attire suitable for the occasion.”

She instinctively looked down at her dirty travelling robes and realized that maybe he was right.

“I suggest you visit the Wench and see what Baderon can arrange,” Reyner said to her excitedly, “He is surprisingly knowledgeable about such things.”

Taking his advice, Claire returned to the Wench to where Baderon was waiting. Yet, before she even was able to tell him what happened…?

“Well, well… if it ain’t Merlwyb’s guest of ‘onor!” he said, grinning from ear to ear.

“How did you…?” Claire began before starting to think that maybe she should just save her breath from now on.

“‘Obnobbin’ with the ‘igh an’ mighty, now, is it? I tell ye, lass, I damn near snorted ale out me nose when I ‘eard the news,” Baderon went on cheerfully, interrupting her once more, “Ye’ve come a long bloody way, you ‘ave, an’ that’s the truth. Well, one thign’s fer sure—ye’ll not want fer decent grub. These banquets are catered by the bleedin’ Bismarck, no less.”

He then looked her over and shook his head as he said, “But we can’t have ye turnin’ up in yer shite-caked ‘venturin’ gear. No, the ‘ero o’ the ‘our needs to ‘ave a touch o’ refinement about ‘er—if only to stop folk complainin’ when she stuffs ‘er face with cake.”

She raised an eyebrow at that, fighting the urge to laugh as he told her to take herself down to the Octant and speak to a woman name J’nasshym of the Brugaire Consortium. Apparently the moment that Baderon heard about his new ‘prized’ adventurer rising up in the world, he had ordered something for her.

Claire soon went to see what was waiting for her, and soon meet this J’nasshym, who handed over a package, telling her to bring it back to Baderon. Feeling as though she was running around in circles, she returned to the Wench, where Baderon opened the package for her.

“‘Ere we go… a nice pair o’ dress shoes fer ye,” he said, holding out a pair of brand-new black
shoes for her. “A lass mightn’t ‘ave much else to ‘er name, but so long as she’s got a decent pair o’ shoes on ‘er feet, there aint nowhere she can’t go. Think of ‘em as a gift from me an’ all the other folk ye’ve done right by along the way.”

Claire found his logic to be a little unlikely. But as she took the shoes, she looked up to thank him… when he interrupted by saying, “Aye, aye… ‘tis a very movin’ gesture, I know. Just don’t go wellin’ up on me, eh? Wouldn’t do fer Limsa’s new ‘ero to turn up at the banquet soaked in ‘er own tears an’ snot. Anyroad, that’s yer garb sorted. Now, ye just need to settle yer nerves. Let me know when yer ready, an’ I’ll tell ye where yer meant to go.”

So, after heading back to her inn room, she began to look through her entire wardrobe of clothes to find something decent to wear.

She really didn’t have much in terms of what one would call… ‘ladylike’ clothing. Most of her garments were dirty, covered in blood, and torn to pieces. Which really made her realize that she would have to start gathering more gear if she wanted to go any further with her adventuring career. Thankfully, with some of the many other adventurers she had met since coming here, were more than able to help out. By the time that she was finished, she had been given a new spring dress and matching skirt that flowed about her so lightly that she almost couldn’t feel any weight from it. She felt a little self-conscious about how low the dress was, but she had to admit that by the time that she put the shoes and few other accessories, she did feel very ladylike.

When she felt as ready as she could ever feel, she went before Baderon, who was more than happy to tell her where to go. The banquet was going to start soon in the Admirals briefing room, which she could enter just below them and if she took any longer, he would see it as his civic duty to drag her over there himself.

“Just keep that ‘ead ‘eld ‘igh, lass,” he told her as he pushed her towards the door, “After everything’ ye’ve done fer Limsa, ye’ve good reason to be proud—an’ don’t let no ‘igh-born bugger tell ye different.”

Feeling better, she soon found the briefing room, where the maelstrom guard let her in. She was standing in a wide-open room, where there was already a large buffet of food set up for them and several people, both in Maelstrom colors, or dressed as some of the higher residents of Limsa. She felt out of place here, at least until she spotted some familiar faces, including Reyner and Y’shtola, who waved her over.

She was grateful for the chance to speak with them—though, in her case she mostly listened as they told her about some of the people that were here. After enjoying some of the food from the table, where there were already drinking and dancing going on, was when the Admiral finally appeared.

They all turned to the door when she came in, and she watched as the Admiral’s eyes seemed to trail over every person in the room before landing on her… where she smiled.

“Brothers and sisters of the sea!” she called to them all. “Join me now in honoring this woman for her services to our great nation!” They all applauded her as she went on, “May the Navigator guide and protect her on her journey till sea swallows all!”

Claire felt her face blush once more when the people around her began to applaud and cheer. She was sure her face was now burning when the Admiral came over to speak with her in person. Y’shtola soon joined them and the conversation soon turned to the recent attack and of everything that happened.
“Most of them are dead,” the Admiral stated matter-of-factly. “Including the masked man who seemed to be the cause of all of this. The few who survived will be facing trials before we decide what to do with them.”

“Full glad I am to hear that,” Y’shtola said, “As well as many in town would be.”

The Admiral nodded before looking to Claire.

“These pirates you encountered with the tattooed faces… they call themselves the ‘Serpent Reavers’,,” the Admiral explained to her, “Their ranks are formed of cutthroats and madmen who have pledged themselves body and soul to the primal Leviathan.”

Claire barely had time to wonder just who Leviathan was, or even what a primal could possibly be before the Admiral went on, “From what we have gathered, they sought to swell their numbers by spiriting away any soul unfortunate enough to cross their path. I need not tell you the depth of the animosity between us and the Sahagin. How any seaman worth his salt could devote himself to the Fishbacks’ god is a question for a more temperate mind than mine. But thanks to you, our citizens may once more go about their daily lives, safe in the knowledge that they will not be dragged into the darkness by those execrable curs.”

No sooner did she say that though did she feel something warm spread across her entire being. At first she thought that it was just the praise getting to her… at least until she realized that it was actually coming from the crystal she still carried.

As she raised a hand to her chest, the crystal she was unable to throw away suddenly glinted with a slight flash of light, as if trying to get her attention.

Yet, it seemed that Y’shtola saw it.

“Such an extraordinary glow…” Y’shtola said slowly, also having seen the glint and watched as Claire pulled out the crystal to look at it, realizing that it was glowing brightly in her hand. It shone with this beautiful light, still slightly wet to the touch that made her fell as if she was holding a piece of the ocean waves itself.

She looked up to Y’shtola and the Admiral, where they were gapping at the sight of it.

“This… is one of the Crystals of Light,” Y’shtola gasped, her eyes wide with amazement.

“By the Navigator…” the Admiral also gasped as if they had never seen such a thing before. Now Claire was feeling very confused and wanted to ask what was going on before Y’shtola spoke again.

“After our encounter with the goobbue, you had a vision, did you not?” the miqo’te pressed her.

“Of a ‘Towering crystal’?”

Claire put the crystal away and nodded as Y’shtola stared up at the Admiral again and whispered in awe, “You bathed in Her light…”

Her? What did she mean?

Perhaps they finally noticed the confusion on her face and sought to explain what was going on.

“Y’shtola’s conclusion is clear, and I see no reason to doubt it,” Merlwyb said, addressing her with a new kind of respect there. “You are the vessel of a higher power. This… being from your vision… was the Mothercrystal. Your description matches what little we know of her. And if She
has chosen you, then your deeds may yet shape the fate of nations. As once did the deeds of the Warriors of Light.”

Claire blinked again, feeling as though they couldn’t be more wrong about this. She knew the story of Mother Hydaelyn, of course she did. Yet… She chose her for a vessel? For what? There had to be some mistake or logical explanation about this. Because she was just an ordinary adventurer who was trying to make a living, nothing more than that.

However, the dream she had before of the towering crystal reappeared in her mind’s eye and she felt… she felt… to be honest, she wasn’t sure how she felt.

“Know you the tale?” Merlwyb questioned her suddenly, bring her back to the present, “Like you, they were not of these lands, yet they fought to protect us all ‘gainst the corruption of the primals. When the Garlean Empire began its conquest of the realm, these heroes joined the Grand Companies, and helped reforge the Eorzean Alliance.”

She then watched as the Admirla’s eyes turned both sad and hardened… remembering those terrible days of the battle and of all that they lost.

“And at the Battle of Carteneau, they took the field beneath our banners, to fight for everything we hold dear,” she went on, her gaze still turning rather misty at that point, “It was on that day, in the midst of that hell… that we lost them. Every soul who survived that battle will never forget how it was to fight beside them. We are proud to call them our comrades. Yet, whenever we try to shout their names, the sound dies in our throats. And whenever we strain to see their faces with our mind’s eye, naught but their shadows appear to us, set against a blinding light. Ask any true Eorzean who knew them, and the story will be the same. It is for this reason that we call them the Warriors of Light.”

She then looked back to her, with a new kind of emotion that Claire couldn’t name, gazing back.

“When I look upon you,” she confessed softly, “I cannot help but be reminded of them.”

Claire felt her own eyes widen at that. But why? Why would she say something like that? Had she thought about joining those ranks? To be considered a hero among heroes? Sure, she imagined it at first when she first heard of the Warriors of Light, but she had no interest in actually becoming one. No, she didn’t like where this was going.

“Keep that crystal safe. In time, I believe the Mothercrystal will make clear Her reasons for bestowing it upon you,” Merlwyb told her sagely, “Heed well Her words, adventurer. For it is Hydaelyn Herself who speaks.”

Still full of unease, but she nodded, showing that she at least understood. She was sure that there was some kind of mistake here, and that no one in their right minds would call some nobody adventurer a Warrior of Light. Once she realized that, she suddenly felt much better and believed that everything would work out in the end.

At least… until she felt a terrible pain wrack her skull. It came without warning, much like how it did last time and she felt her hand going up to her head to hold onto her head as she suddenly left the banquet hall behind…

And then she was gone.

*Flashback*

*She wasn’t sure where she was this time. Only that where she stood, she could see only darkness*
above her and flames below. She was standing upon the edge of a cliff that overlooked a valley where she could see the forms of fighting breaking out. The sky was pitch dark above her... thick clouds of smoke covered the sky so that the stars were hidden from. But instead, there was a gargantuan blood-red sphere hanging right above their heads as it slowly was falling towards the ground. It was glowing so bright that it cast the entire field below it with this early light, while faint glowing cracks in the sphere glowed blue and golden... large pieces fitting together almost like it was a puzzle.

She could hear the sounds of thunder... or was it from the fighting below? She could not tell. All she knew was that whatever this storm was, it seemed to reach every corner of the world while the battle below was bathed in fire and blood. Even from up here, she could see all manner of people locked in combat against massive magitek weapons and soldiers in thick, black armor.

She then heard voices next to her and she looked to see that she wasn’t alone. She was standing in front of a small encampment that had a couple canopies brought up and three standards flying in the harsh winds as smoke continued to rise around them. She looked up to see a blood-red banner that bore a black ship... another that was a bright yellow with two entwined serpents, and the last was black with a pair of scales that held a jewel on one end and a helm on the other.

Below them, were a group of people; she could make out soldiers, a few she recognized as Maelstrom members, but there were others of different colors that matched the banners. All but for three who stood out in front. She recognized the Admiral at once. She looked just like how she did when she first met her... tall and proud with a black coat that flew out behind her from the wind. She cast her silver grey eyes below her with a calculating look that she knew to be planning some sort of strategy.

Standing next to her, however were two figures she didn’t recognize. One of them was a smaller woman, who had golden-blonde hair that was curled up elegantly around her head... and what looked to be two long, white horns sticking out from her hair. She was wearing a set of silver robes with a matching headdress that sparkled slightly as she held a staff that looked to be made of some kind of wood and crystal mixed together as her green eyes were shown sadness. And the last... was a man that towered over even the Admiral. Dark skin with tattoos on his arms, decked out in full armor, including a heavy-looking helm with the shape of a bulls head. His face was covered scars as he glared about the field, as if daring their foes to come and attack him.

“Flames, to the fore!” he cried with a deep voice that rang with certainty, “Victory belongs to the bold! Show those imperial whoresons what we’re made of!”

At that, the Admiral barked out with a commanding call once she decided upon her next course, “The left flank buckles! Divert the Barracudas!” She then directed her own men behind her as she commanded, “Bid ’em hold that position though it cost ’em their lives!”

That was when the horned woman also gave her orders, her voice eerily calm yet just as commanding as the other two as she ordered, “The Yellow Serpents are in need of succor. Pray send the White Wolves to their aid.” She placed a hand over her heart as if in pain and finished, “The adventurers risk life and limb for our cause. We must not fail them.”

Suddenly, she felt something. Through the cloud of smoke and ash, she felt as if someone was watching them. She turned her head immediately to see that standing a fair distance away from them was a dark-hooded and robed figure. Much like the one she had fought before. Only this one was wearing a crimson mask that covered half his face instead of the black one. And even from this distance, she could see that he was smirking.

“Is aught amiss?” the Admiral asked quickly and she looked back to see that the horned woman
was also looking out.

“No...” she replied, shaking her head. “It is nothing.”

Just then, a burst of flames were fired from somewhere and it was flying straight towards them. However, before it hit them, it collided with a sort of barrier. It took on the form of some massive invisible bubble, and though they were unharmed, the attack was enough to cause the soldiers behind them to cry out and chocobos to shriek in terror.

“The barrier won’t go down so easily!” battle-scarred man roared without tearing his eyes away. “Eyes forward!”

After their soldiers fell silent, they continued to watch the battle before the horned woman frowned at the sight and turned around. Claire looked back as well, only to see that the crimson-masked man had disappeared before she told her fellows grimly, “We are being watched.”

After a few more minutes, the battle-scarred man was holding his ear to where his linkpearl was and he was now demanding, “Raging Bull calling Blood Thorn! Blood Thorn, respond! Respond, damn you!”

But after a few minutes, it was clear that they weren’t answering and he was now striding angrily back and forth among them, looking ready to head out onto the field of battle himself. At least until the Admiral looked at him warningly before he let out a bull-like bellow of rage.

However, at that moment, she could hear another voice coming through, but it was faint and difficult to make out.

“Raging Bull! This is Mad Snake! Respond!”

At the sound of the voice, the battle-scarred man bellowed out, “Ryder? This is Raging Bull! What news!?”

“We’re surrounded by a blaze! There’s no way out!” the voice crackled, trying to tell him what was happening before his voice grew panicked and soon he was screaming, “Gods preserve, what is that thing!?”

“What’s going on!? the man demanded, as the two women turned to watch him. “Speak to me!”

“Godsdammit! We cannot hold much longer!” Ryder’s voice cut in and out, and suddenly a scream tore through the linkpearl, leaving only static and then silence. Claire turned away, her heart heavy at that even as the man was now screaming out, “Mad Snake!? Mad Saaaaaaake! Answer me!”

With no other response, he understood what this meant and he let out another enraged bellow of pain as he slammed his fist into the ground before he was able to climb up to his feet once again.

“Damn it!” he cursed as he turned skywards and bellowed to any who could hear. “Damn it all to the seventh hell!”

He wasn’t the only one affected by this. The others were looking equally solemn and angry at all that was happening.

“What of the Barracudas?” the Admiral demanded to one of her soldiers, “Can they not be reached?”
At the command, he tried his linkpearl before declaring, “Sorry, Admiral. Shell’s not workin’!”

The third woman turned to her men and asked in her moderate voice, “What of our own?”

He shook his head sadly. “I cannot say, my lady! That monstrosity appears to be disrupting our communications!”

“We must keep trying,” she told him softly. “Call till they respond.”

“Yes, my lady!” he agreed and set off to try once more.

Claire watched them as the sky only seemed to grow darker, the fires below them glowed brighter… and the moon in the distance seemed to be breaking apart as it continued its decent.

After a long silence, the horned woman turned to the others and declared, “Admiral, General-- we can do no more. We must give the order to withdraw.”

The General turned and growled out in protest, “I will not forsake Louisoix!”

“General, please!” she retorted with reason. “Victory may belong to the bold, but there will be no victor this day!” And by looking at the scene of hellfire stretched out before her, Claire had to admit that they had a point.

“You know this to be true,” she went on. “Let us not sacrifice lives in vain.” Her men stood to join her, standing at her side as she finished, “The adventurers fight bravely, but to no avail. Let them withdraw, and let us be the ones to stand with Louisoix.”

After a moment of hesitation, the Admiral nodded in agreement and turned to her own men as she ordered, “Belay previous orders! All Maelstrom units are commanded to fall back, effective immediately! Give the Foreign Levy priority! Let the main host cover their retreat, and bring up the rear!”

After they went off to complete their orders, the General seemed to see the reason in this as he gave in.

“Damn it…” he growled before turning to his men and snarled out, “Relay the order: all Flames are to withdraw. I don’t care if our linkshells are useless! You still have a working pair of legs, don’t you!? Well, use ‘em, you bloody half-wit!”

Cowled by the General’s burst of anger, the poor soldier turned and sprinted off to relay the orders. Claire turned back to look to the woman in white and watched as she stood upon the very edge of the plateau and watched as the battle raged on and what looked like meteors raining down around them, exploding upon impact and fire rose up so that more smoke was added to the sky.

“The outcome of this battle was long since decided,” she said, “Better to retreat now, than risk a massacre.”

Claire watched as she turned around and saw the serious expression on this woman’s face as she looked back to where the masked man had been standing and she heard her whisper, with her hand pressed to her heart, “This dark, stifling presence... Who...or what...?”

At her words, she drew the attention of the others. Without waiting for them to ask what she meant, she told them, “We go to take our place beside Archon Louisoix! To your positions!”

The scene then faded at that, and she was taken by darkness… at least until she blinked and she
was suddenly standing upon another cliff. This time, she could see the group in the distance talking amongst themselves as hell continued to rain down upon them.

She then heard a slight chuckle and looked up to realize she was standing beside the masked man she spotted before. But he wasn’t alone… he was standing with another… this one wearing the same pitch-black mask of the masked mage she defeated not long ago.

“That I should live to behold Bahamut once more…” the crimson-masked one murmured to him, and though she wasn’t sure what it was… there was something strange about his voice. While she understood what he said, she couldn’t help but feel there was something wrong about it. But he kept his eyes upon the heavens as he watched the red sphere cracking and breaking apart.

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“Magnificent,” he all but purred, “The aeons of imprisonment have only made him hungrier.”

Who was he talking about? Yet he didn’t elaborate as he continued to look upon the battlefield, his grin widening as he held up his arms and proclaimed, “It has begun. Soon the planet will regain its true form.”

He threw his head back, and a vicious, triumphant cackle filled the air as he watched the red moon rain fire down upon the battlefield.

Claire looked up as she could swear she saw the images of great, black wings that covered the sky…

And then everything was gone.

*End of Flashback*

She felt sick and disoriented; not entirely sure she knew where she was or what was going on. She remembered drifting in and out of consciousness, almost like she was stuck between waking and dreaming. She didn’t want to wake up though, she wanted to drift back off into a peaceful sleep.

Yet she soon realized that she could hear the ocean, and she felt warm sun on her face as she laid upon something very soft. Finally forcing her eyes open, she tried to make out through her blurry vision a stone and wooden ceiling right above her. The sound of the ocean was coming outside a window where bright sunlight was now blazing through.

She then realized that she recognized the place around her and realized she was in her inn room… though she wasn’t sure how she got here.

As her mind slowly began to catch up with her, she heard a knock at the door and looked over in time to see Baderon walking in with a cheerful expression. It was a little strange to see him from out behind the counter as he said with a bright cheerfulness, “Mornin’, sunshine. All a bit much for ye, was it?”

As he walked over to her bedside, she sat up and looked around before asking, “What happened?”

“…What ‘appened?” he repeated, “Ah, ye don’t remember, then. Ye keeled over in the middle o’ the banquet, an’ caused right stir. ‘Ad to carry ye back to the Wench meself. Well, I say ‘carry’…”
'twas more a matter o’ draggin’ an’ rollin’. Too much cake, I reckon. Anyroad, don’t fret—’tis little wonder ye was exhausted after everythin’ ye’ve been through lately.”

Was that it? Was it just exhaustion? But then… what of that dream? Of the Admiral and the others standing upon that plateau as they overlooked the battle? Looking back, she realized that it had to have been during the Battle of Carteneau… one of a few events that led up to what would become known as the Calamity.

She rolled out of bed as Baderon looked over her with a slightly worried expression.

“Yer little nap seems to ‘ave put some color back in yer cheeks, though, so I’ll leave ye to it,” he finished, seeming satisfied that she was alright, “…Bugger! I almost forgot: the Admiral wants to ‘ave a word with ye. When ye feel up to it, talk to Zanthael an’ ‘e’ll let ye in to the command room. Oh, an’ stay awake, eh? I’m told ol’ Merlwyb was in the middle o’ tellin’ ye a story when ye started snorin’ last time, an’ I doubt she’d look kindly on it if ye repeated the trick!”

She thanked him for bringing her back and taking care of her as he laughed and waved his hand and walked to the door.

“It’s no problem, lass. It’s what I’m ‘ere fer! Now, ye take better care of yeself, ye hear me?” he told her and she nodded. Once he was gone, she changed out of the spring dress and back into some of the newer gear she had been saving up for. It seemed a good time to try it out, though she wasn’t entirely sure what she would do today. She was wondering if she could try exploring the rest of La Noscea this day after she went to speak with the Admiral. She wanted to see what she wanted… and to apologize for any trouble she caused last night.

She was soon allowed inside the room, only to see that it was completely empty, but for the Admiral, who stood behind the desk and looked up when she entered.

“Ah, Claire, it is good to see you on your feet again,” she said, “You are recovered?”

She nodded before apologizing for what happened, which the Admiral shook her head, telling her not to worry about it.

“Then let us waste no time,” she went on more business-like. “I have a task that needs doing—one I would entrust to no other. I have penned a letter to each of my counterparts in the Eorzean Alliance.”

To Claire’s surprise, she handed over two letters with names upon them. The first one read out: Kan-E-Senna… while the second read out Raubahn Aldynn. Neither of those names ran a bell for her, but the Admiral had already walked around her desk and was looking out the window, her back to Claire, as she explained, “The Battle of Carteneau and the Calamity that followed claimed countless lives. It has been five years since those of us who were spared dragged ourselves from the ashes to look upon an Eorzea we scarcely knew… Five years, and yet the people still suffer. Their lives are fraught with worry and hardship, and the Warriors of Light who might once have given them hope are gone.”

Claire remembered the vision from last night and felt cold chills going up her spine at the idea of anyone living through the hellfire that rained down from the sky or was forced to breathe in the smoke from the battle while the smell of blood came from everywhere. She hid her shiver when the Admiral turned back to her to continue.

“Yet we must press on regardless,” she said firmly, “We will never truly do so, however, till we have faced our past. To that end, I am proposing that a memorial service be held in each of the city-
states on the fifth anniversary of the Battle of Carteneau. These letters contain the details of said proposal. And I would have you deliver them to our allies as my personal envoy.”

Claire was completely taken aback by this and she felt her jaw fall open a little at this news as she could have sworn a rather playful smile appeared on the Admiral’s face at her surprise.

“You have proven yourself a staunch and able ally to Limsa, but that is not my only reason for choosing you,” she told her, “No. I choose you because you possess a quality which puts me in mind of history’s champions. A quality I feared lost. Say that you will perform this duty.”

She didn’t know what to say. All she could do was nod, feeling greatly honored at such a sentence as the Admiral grinned and said, “I knew you would not disappoint me. A grueling journey, to be sure… were you to travel by sea and land. But I mean to have you take to the skies.”

That was when she handed over a small pass on golden paper and Claire’s eyes widen as she read the top. An unlimited pass to be allowed to use the airships whenever she wanted?

She stared up at her, unable to find the words to thank her for this as the Admiral looked back to her, explaining, “An airship pass, to be used at your discretion. Airship bound for the nations of our allies leave from the landing connected to the Bridge. But before you depart, I suggest you trouble Baderon for a few pearls of wisdom regarding each of your destinations. The old bastard is nothing if not well traveled. ‘Tis a pity I cannot issue such passes with a freer hand, as I did in more peaceful times, when berths were not so limited. But in these times of war, every craft we commit to the clouds risks drawing the eye of the Empire, and every voyage must needs be born of necessity.”

When she saw her open her mouth, she guessed what she was about to say and countered, “Lest you doubt, I consider your place well deserved. Nor am I alone in that opinion. There were other parties who would see you granted the privilege of air travel.”

She didn’t know what to say, but the idea that she was now able to travel to the rest of Eorzea at her leisure…? Just the idea sent a chill of excitement through her body and her legs were tingling, as if they couldn’t believe she was still waiting.

Yet what she said cause her some curiosity. What other parties wanted to see her with the privilege of air travel?

The Admiral turned around again, as she confessed, “Aye, Claire, your deeds do not go unnoticed. Full many see great promise in you. But I have flattered you enough. On behalf of Limsa Lominsa and her people, I bid you go forth, adventurer.”

Claire nodded as the Admiral finished, “Discover the realm for which so many have fought and died. Wonder and danger await you in equal measure, but turn not from either. Only by braving the unknown will you achieve the greatness of which you are surely capable.”

She suddenly looked to her chest and somehow she knew that the Admiral was thinking of the crystal she showed them last night.

“The light of the Crystal guides you, and I wager that your destiny will be no small thing,” she finished and waved her off.

Claire bowed in gratitude, promising not to disappoint her as she left the room.

As she left, the Admiral kept her eyes on her until she heard footsteps behind her and she raised her eyebrows to see the form of Y’shtola step out from the shadows.
“How long have you been there?” she asked before turning around to gaze back out at the view that overlooked the ocean, “Long enough to overhear everything?”

“I was merely curious to see who you would choose to be your envoy,” Y’shtola confessed calmly as she approached the desk. “I have to say that you made a fine choice. But unusual. After all, most would have expected you to choose one of your own Maelstrom lieutenants or Yellowjackets, not an adventurer.”

The Admiral continued staring out as Y’shtola went on, “I’m a little surprised you didn’t tell her about the Scions being interested in her.”

“She probably doesn’t even know about you Scions yet,” the Admiral explained calmly, “I don’t wish to influence her decision. After all, joining your ranks would be a great challenge for anyone.”

“I agree,” Y’shtola chuckled, “I fear that we may be more than she would bargain for. We are quite the handful.”

There was a long silence for a moment before the Admiral began, “About last night…?”

“You would be right in assuming it. I do believe that she had a vision,” Y’shtola interrupted, “We know for certain now that she has the Echo. I have seen Minfilia act similarly in the past… although for a vision to cause one to pass out like that? It could be that the vision was a particularly powerful memory… or perhaps she was called to by Hydaelyn once again? I cannot say. I do wish that I knew what it was that she saw.” She paused and added, “After explaining everything to Minfilia, she believes after you told her of the Battle you witnessed five year ago… it is possible that she may have had a vision of that terrible day.”

The Admiral sighed at that as she brushed a few stray hairs out of her face.

“That is a vision I would not wish on anyone,” she admitted her quietly. “There are days I wish I could forget. But tell me. What do you expect out of her?”

“We were curious at first,” Y’sthola confessed. “We are always on the lookout for potential new members to join us. After learning of her vision of the Mothercrystal… and later on realizing she has the power of the Echo…? I was merely told to keep an eye on her by Minfilia… for we were worried that there may be unseen forces who were also interested in her. Yet last night, after seeing that she carries with her a Crystal of Light…?”

“Even among Her chosen, being gifted a Crystal of Light is rare, is it not?” the Admiral asked curiously.

“Indeed it is,” Y’shtola sighed as she shut her eyes. “Only a few of her chosen have ever been granted such a gift throughout history. I cannot be certain, yet it would seem that Hydaeyln has great expectations out of this adventurer.”

“So, you will ask her to join the Scions?” the Admiral asked her.

“Nay, not just yet,” Y’shtola shook her head, “I do not wish to make her feel she has to join anything and, to be honest, I’m still curious to see how she acts with this new responsibility of your personal envoy. It’s still too early to say, so I will continue to watch over her for the foreseeable future. But I have hopes for her.”

Meanwhile, Claire headed back up the stairs to the Drowning Wench, every step feeling lighter than the last as she thought about what was waiting for her on this next journey. Now all the realm of Eorzea was open for her to explore it was too good an offer to say no to. She wanted to see all of
it and she was ready to take this next step.

She spotted Baderon at his counter again as she stepped forward with bright eyes.

“Back from yer meetin’ with the Admiral, are ye?” he asked with that usual grin when she approached him. It only took a few minutes to tell him about the meeting and when she finished, his jaw about hit the floor as he proclaimed loudly to any who would listen: “Personal bleedin’ envoy!? So ye’ll be carryin’ the word o’ the Admiral ‘erself to the leaders o’ the Alliance!? Bugger me… I knew ye was goin’ up in the world, but I didn’t realize ye’d got that bloody ‘igh! I’m proud o’ ye, lass! Thinkin’ of ‘ow far ye’ve come… why, ‘tis enough to bring a tear to me eye! An’ that ain’t the ale talkin’, neither—well, not just the ale at any rate… Bless the Navigator fer steerin’ ye my way.”

She laughed slightly, feeling herself blushing once again at the praise as Baderon went on talking a little about the forests of Gridania and the deserts of Ul’dah… which only caused her excitement to grow.

But after that, Baderon folded his arms and said a little more seriously, “There’s an ‘eap of troubles what plague every nation, see—‘tain’t just ours. I’m talkin’ intrigue an’ in-fighting, beastmen an’ their godsdamned primals—aye, there’s an ugly side to life, and sooner or later, yer bound to walk into it,” Baderon informed her, “…But I’ll wager there’s bugger all out there as you can’t ‘andle. Summat tells me yer goin’ to be just fine. The realm’s ‘ad it rough, ‘tis true, but folk’re beginnin’ to recover from the beatin’ the Calamity dealt ‘em.”

He then grinned again and finished, “Call me an ‘opless optimist, but it wouldn’t take much to turn things around. ‘Tis the perfect time for a ‘venturer like yerself to get out there an’ make a difference! Well, what are ye waitin’ for!?”

She laughed again as he all but pushed her towards the lift, telling her to ride it all the way to the top. She stopped by her inn room for just a quick moment to check over her bag and bought a few more potions before she rode the lift to the top. When she exited, she was standing in a small area that was surrounded by an iron fence and a small counter. She went to the ticket master, who greeted her.

“Greeting, madam. This is the counter for passengers traveling to Gridania,” she said automatically before her eyes widened. “Wait, aren’t you that famous adventurer? It’s Claire Faye, isn’t it? I thought I recognized you! You are an inspiration to us all, madam! Highwind Skyways is at your disposal! Will you be traveling with us today?”

Perhaps it would be good to get out of Limsa for a little while.

After allowing her through, one of the attendants began calling out, over the sound of a ringing bell, “Attention, all passengers: the airship bound for Gridania is about to depart. Please make your way to the boarding gate.

She was the only other one who got on board, though she remembered what the Admiral saying that air travel was difficult these days. Upon climbing the gangplank, she patiently waited as the bell rang again, signaling that it was the final call and the ship was about to leave. Once everything was ready, the ship backed out slowly, so she was travelling backwards until they were out of the hanger and up in the air. She closed her eyes as she breathed in the smell of the salty air one more time before she looked down at the white stone and pointed buildings below her.

To her astonishment, she could see a few people directly below her, all of them waving up at the ship. Even from this distance, she could make out a few Yellowjackets, some Summerford
Farmers, craftsmen of Limsa, Maelstrom soldiers…? And what looked to be Baderon and Y’shtola out in front. She smiled down at them as she turned her attention back to the sky, wondering just what waiting for her next was.

Down below, the citizens of Limsa Lominsa were all waving their goodbyes to her, unknowingly also being watched by the Admiral as she kept her eye upon the airship.

“The day’ll come when yer name means the same as ‘ero to the folk o’ this realm,” Baderon said at one point with a fond smile, knowing that the little greenhorn he first met no longer needed his guidance and was ready to head out on her own. “May ye walk in the light o’ the crystal…”

*Y’shtola*

Y’shtola watched as the airship turned and began to head off towards the northeast, to where she knew the forests were awaiting her. She turned and began to walk away from the surprisingly large crowd who came to see her off as she reached up to her ear.

“Tis I,” she said, “The Admiral has indeed chosen her to be her personal envoy and our adventurer friend has just left Limsa and will be making her way towards Gridania. If it is alright with you, I wish to continue to keep a watch for a while longer.”

“If you feel that is the best option, you have my blessing,” her friend said on the other end. “But what of Limsa?”

“Things are calm here for the time being,” Y’shtola explained, knowing that with the news that the kidnappings were solved for the time being, there was an unsteady peace throughout the city. “I believe that it will be safe enough for me to leave for a short amount of time. Besides, I know that Papalymo and Yda are busy this day, and I don’t wish to bother Thancred right now with all the work he has been performing lately.”

“Very well,” her friend told her. “If nothing else, please ensure that she arrives safely. And if you are right in that the Ascians are involved then…?”

“Then there is a chance that they won’t take kindly to her presence,” she finished for her. “Especially now that we know she possess both the Echo and a Crystal of Light. I understand and I will be keeping watch from a distance just to make sure she is in no immediate danger. I will be heading off to Gridania in a few minutes. I’ll be teleporting, so I am sure to beat her there. All that I ask is that you let Papalymo and Yda know what is going on. Knowing them they may try to meet her in person and…?”

“Yes, its best that we don’t let her know that she is being watched,” she agreed on the other end, “I don’t think that will be much of a good first impression. Safe travels my friend. And let me know what you think when you are ready.”

“Understood,” Y’shtola agreed as she continued walking. “I’ll visit in person to let you know what I think. Though, from what I have seen so far… I think that we would greatly benefit from someone like her joining us. I’ll speak to you again anon.”

She then hung up as she teleported, leaving the sea behind and heading towards the thick forests of Gridiana.
It's Probably Pirates

Chapter Summary

After being assigned the role of envoy, our new adventurer sets out to get her first glimpse of the other nations of Ul'dah and Gridania. Before she is able to fully enjoy the new sights however, she is called back to Limsa... to deal with a threat of pirates.

Claire flew overhead through skies that couldn’t have been clearer that day. She looked over the edge was she watched the sparkling oceans slowly change until she was over land once again… before moving to a thick, wooded area. The canopies of the trees were so clustered together that she was having a hard time seeing the ground and was wondering what this nation of Gridania were going to be like.

Soon enough, she realized that the trees were slowly growing closer and she knew that they would be landing soon. She moved back away from the sides as the ship slowly sank over the ground, disappearing underneath the trees and over a babbling river. The air was thick with the smell of flowers and leaves, with a hint of tree bark mixed in for good measure. While Claire did come to enjoy the salty smell of the ocean, she could not deny that she was already enjoying her time here —and she hadn’t even seen the town yet!

The ship slowly hovered over the river before coming in to land near a large, wooden building that had a large rolling mill attached to the side, bringing up water over the large wheel with a soft splashing noise. She felt the ship slowly pull in and come to an eventual stop along the landing deck after a bump and a whistle sounding, signaling its arrival. She slowly stepped off and had a good look around as her feet touched the hard boards of the deck. She walked along the narrow walkway until she came out to the ticket booth, who directed her through the gate.

She was in a warm, but rather dark area where she could see other travelers climbing up and down the nearby staircase. She was just beginning to wonder where she should go from here when she spotted a man dressed in a similar fashion as the Maelstrom members… only he wore colors of a bright yellow and she could see an emblem of two white serpents entertained upon the front.

Still, he seemed to be looking around for someone and so she approached him, explaining who she was and if he could be kind enough to help her.

“Greetings, good madam,” he said when she finished, and he bowed low, “Pray make your way into the city proper, and identify yourself to the conjurer at Nophica’s Altar. She will admit you to the Lotus Stand, where the Elder Seedseer awaits.”

That sounded easy enough, so she climbed the stairs, only to be greeted by a vast inn that was very different from anything she had seen so far. While the Drowning Wench was full of the smell of ale and drunkards as they looked out at the sea… this place was more… homely. She could see all manner of people eating full meals at the tables while they talked about their day. There were a series of stunning stained-glass windows that were in the shape of the most exotic flowers she could imagine, while the smell of honey and wood filled her nostrils.

She certainly wasn’t in Limsa anymore.
And this was more apparent when she stepped outside to be greeted by a grassy road that led upwards to more of the city. Instead of stone and bridge walkways, they were on solid ground with elaborately built buildings of wood that looked as if they had grown up like the trees around them. She soon passed by the main aetheryte spinning in the distance and immediately went over to attune herself to it so that she would not have to rely upon airship travel every time to come here.

She asked where she could find the Nophica’s Altar, where a helpful guard—who referred to herself as a Wood Wailer—informed her to simply follow the signs. Nophica’s Altar was the guild where they taught the art of conjury, or the arts of healing, and the signs should be able to point her out there.

Claire left her, choosing to take the long way around the city so that she could get a good look at everything. Where the first thing she saw was a building full of lumber, where a small playground had been set up right outside it where she could see a handful of children playing. She then wandered up to the newer part of Gridania, where she passed through a series of market stalls where more people were clamoring for an adventurer like her to buy from them. She then passed on through several more guilds, including one where she saw the sign of a lance posted outside, another which was full of skins and leathers, and even saw a few signs that pointed off in the distance to where she could learn archery.

There were countless groupings of flowers as well, filling the air with their sweet smell while the trees shaded the bright sun from above. It was so different from Limsa, yet she found herself drawn to this city in the woods right away and hoped that she would be able to visit more often in the future. Compared to the usual loud commotion that Limsa usually had, this town looked more… quiet. Like a good place one would wish to retire as they lived out the rest of their days simply. As she continued on her way through; though, she found herself pausing whenever she saw someone looking upset and wanting to help them.

These quests weren’t that difficult; in fact, it reminded her of all the delivery quests that she did when she first began. She would have to come back here to learn from this city as well when she next had the time.

But before all that fun stuff, she had to focus on her job here.

As she continued to wander through the city however, she soon grew to notice that there was a strange difference with the people here than in Limsa. While it was often dangerous just to walk those streets, what with so many having been former pirates… some of the people she passed by observed her with a more… suspicious attitude. She wasn’t sure why they would look upon a visitor in such a way, but she could not help but feel that more than a few citizens did not like her presence here.

Eventually though, she found her way to the Altar, which was a small cluster of trees that had the brightest, most colorful flowers she had seen so far. There was also a large, bowl-like altar set up in the center of this clearing as she saw various people working or teaching others.

Realizing she didn’t know where to go from here, she looked around for someone who could help her and she spotted one of the blue robed women—who she had overheard were one of the many conjurers in this nation—who was watching her as if to make sure she wouldn’t bother anyone else.

“You are the Lominsan envoy?” the silent conjurer asked, when she approached, “Begging your pardons, madam, but might I inspect the missive you bear?”

Claire reached into her bag and pulled out one of the letters… where she read the name printed in
the Admiral strong, direct handwriting: Kan-E-Senna.

She held it over to the conjurer, who looked over the whole thing before believing that this was the genuine thing.

“Verily, this is the seal of the Admiral of Limsa Lominsa,” she said before handing it back to her, “Please come with me.”

She then turned and walked along a trail through the trees, and she quickly followed behind. The trail soon sloped downwards until they were at the top of a small hill where the conjurer pointed her onwards, reminding her to be respectful towards the Elder Seedseer.

So with a deep breath, Claire walked down the hill until she stepped out into a large clearing that looked to be floating upon a pond. She was underneath a bright opening to the sky, free of trees, and friendly sunshine warmed her face as she stepped down to the water’s edge. There were a series of large tree stumps and stones that were in the water that acted the part of a floor and stepping stones that she was able to step on as delicate looking flower petals drifted across the water. In front of her was a large table with an elegant painted top that reminded her of a flower; while there were several tall and pointed chairs that reminded her of leaves, set up around it.

But her attention was drawn to the people who were standing there as if waiting for her to join them. She saw a few people dressed in the blue conjurer robes, wands tucked into their belts as they watched her, as well as three others who carried spears who wore leather armor of the purest white. They all seemed to be standing around a smaller woman, acting the part of shields for her.

She was a fair-skinned woman, wearing a long white dress with a fur collar with a staff that looked to be a cross between wood and crystal. She had a pair of thin, white horns that were growing out from the side of her head, while a leaf-shaped crown of some kind was wrapped around bright blond hair. When the woman raised her head to look at her, Claire could see a pair of eyes that were the brightest shade of green that she had ever seen were now observing her with a kind warmth.

As soon as she got a good look at this woman though, Claire paused for a moment in surprise as she realized that this was the same woman she had seen before in her vision the night before. She stared at her, feeling a little intimidated, as well as confused as to how she could have ever seen her in a vision that she didn’t fully understand.

“So you are the Lominsan envoy,” the woman that she took to only be Kan-E-Senna said gently. Claire was knocked back to the present and nodded as she went on, “And an adventurer besides. The realm owes much to you and yours. On behalf of our fair nation, I bid you welcome.”

Claire smiled, liking her instantly as she stepped forward.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Kan-E-Senna, Elder Seedseer of Gridania, and leader of the Order of the Twin Adder, our nation’s Grand Company,” the Elder Seedseer introduced herself humbly, “I understand you bear a message from the Admiral.”

She was so taken back by this sudden confirmation that her vision was real that she almost forgot about her mission here. She quickly handed over the letter and watched as Kan-E-Senna broke the seal and read it. Claire stood silently as she watched, wondering if she was going to be tasked with bringing a return message.

“A remembrance service for the fallen of Carteneau…” Kan-E-Senna sighed at what she read before she glanced up at her and explained, “To think that five years have already come and gone… it seems like only yesterday that the Garlean Empire attempted to seize all that we hold
dear. Rising in resistance, the city-states of Eorzea formed the Grand Companies, and joined hands in alliance. But unbeknown to us, the Garleans sought not to best us in battle, but moved instead to enact a terrible plot: the Meteor project, by which the lesser moon Dalamud would be torn down from the heavens to annihilate all life below. In a desperate bid to save the realm from certain destruction, our forces marched for the Carteneau Flats, and there met the VIIth imperial Legion.”

Kan-E-Senna then looked down sadly though Claire didn’t need to imagine such a scene. The vision of the barren landscape, the smoke-filled air filled with an ominous red light as fire and war raged from below?

She could not help but admire the strength of one who had been forced to live through it.

“More bloody a battle I have never seen, and would never wish to see again,” Kan-E-Senna confessed with a deep sadness mixed in her tone, “Yet the carnage was all but a prelude to the atrocity which followed. For despite our best efforts, Dalamud continued its descent, and from it emerged the elder primal Bahamu, who proceeded to rain fire upon Eorzea. The VIIth Imperial Legion was consumed in the blinking of an eye, while our own forces fared little better…”

Claire did not say a word as she let Kan-E-Senna continue speaking of the nightmare of that day. She could not help but wonder when the last time it had been since she last spoke of this to anyone. Indeed, it looked as if her guard were a little taken aback but such honesty. But she didn’t seem to notice this as she went on speaking.

“That any among us were spared defies explanation,” Kan-E-Senna stated, with a hint of confusion in her voice now, “All seemed sure to perish. As the flames converged upon us, I prepared myself for death… only for a brilliant light to envelop me, relieving me of my senses. When at last I awoke, Bahamut was gone, and the land, which had but moments before been aflame, now seemed to me a place unknown—not simply ruined… but changed.”

Changed… she had heard that before about the Calamity, though she wasn’t sure she understood what they meant by changed. But then again, after such devastation, she supposed that the world that they looked out upon was not the same one that they once knew.

“Archon Louisoix may well have been able to shed light upon these mysteries, but he, like so many, never returned from Carteneau. And so we were left with countless questions, and no prospect of an answer. Yet such matters did not long occupy our thoughts, for we had far graver concerns,” Kan-E-Senna confessed grimly, explaining more about the aftermath of the battle, “The Calamity, as the devastation wrought by Bahamut has come to be known, laid our nations nigh to waste, and to this day we struggle to rebuild our lives and homes. To compound matters, the beast tribes continue to summon their primals, while the Empire encroaches upon our borders, consolidating its foothold in Eorzea. The outlook, in short, is bleak.”

There was that word again… primals. What were primals? She had heard the term before but was never able to get a real answer to what they were. She could tell that they weren’t a good thing, but just what were they and what did they mean but ‘summon’ them?

Kan-E-Senna’s expression turned one of grave concern as she held her staff a little closer, looking fleetingly like a child who did not know which way to go.

“In the wake of the Calamity, it has been all each nation could do to nurse its own wounds,” she sighed, “Yet if we are to weather the coming storm, we must needs stand united once more. A remembrance service may well present an opportunity to rekindle the spirit of unity which first gave rise to the Alliance.”
Which was what the Admiral said before she left. She was slowly starting to understand… and it seemed that the leaders of the other nations wished for the whole of Eorzea to be united in their common foes… however, she was also starting to see the many troubles that each nation was facing. This was not going to be easy for anyone, was it?

But it seemed that the Elder Seedseer came back to the matter at hand, because she looked up and said slightly more serious, “I wholeheartedly approve of the Admiral’s proposal. The necessary provisions shall be made for a service here in Gridania.”

Claire nodded as she watched how Kan-E-Senna slowly walked to the table where she gave her staff to one of her guard to hold. She then watched how she wrote out something upon a nearby piece of paper in a flowing signature before handing it over to another one of the guards, who left with a respectful bow.

“You have done the people of Eorzea a fine service this day, and I would not put you to further trouble,” Kan-E-Senna next said when she turned back to her, “I shall see that my reply reaches the Admiral. You, meanwhile, are bound next for Ul’dah, are you not?”

Claire nodded, wondering just what this ‘Jewel of the Desert’ was going to be like.

“Please send the Flame General my regards,” Kan-E-Senna replied with a smile, before she thought about something else and added, “Ah, and if you would be so kind, I should appreciate it if you would inform him that a pet of mine has been ill behaved of late—my wolf, to be precise. Needless to say, he must be brought to heel, and I would very much welcome the General’s counsel on how this might be achieved.”

Claire was confused at this statement. She didn’t seem like the type of person who would keep a pet wolf. But she nodded anyway, promising to deliver the message to the Flame General when she met him.

Kan-E-Senna then smiled again, her hand over her heart as she finished, “I thank you for coming. May the Twelve see you safe to Ul’dah and beyond.”

She then bid her a fond farewell as Claire left politely.

So, that was certainly an experience. She quite enjoyed herself her despite the fact that she was only passing through, but the Elder Seedseer did say that she was welcome to visit their fair nation whenever she wished. Claire would take her up on that offer when she completed the final leg of her task.

It was late afternoon by the time that she returned to the airship docks, already ready to head out. The airship ticketer greeted her when she approached.

“Greetings, madam,” she said, “This is the counter for passengers traveling to Ul’dah.” That was when she seemed to recognize her from earlier and gasped out, “Oh, are you not Claire Faye, the Lominsan envoy? On behalf of all at Highwind Skyways, may I say what an honor it is to serve you! Will you be flying with us today?”

Claire nodded, informing them that she was bound for Ul’dah next.

Soon enough, she boarded the next airship to Ul’dah, and she watched as the trees were shrinking away from her as they returned to the sky. As they flew over the forests, she could tell they were heading more to the south now and the lush green forests soon became more spread out and plains took over. It was only another hour after that did they turn into sands and small cliffs. She stared
around her at the dry savanna and the blazing hot sun that was beating down on them.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about the sun, madam,” the driver called to her as he enjoyed the hot air hitting their faces. “It’s supposed to get cloudy soon enough and this place will become more bearable.

Claire didn’t mind the heat so much as she turned her attention to the dry land below. Some areas were full of sand like a beach… malms upon malms of endless hills of sand, while other areas looked so hard and dry that they were just cracking apart as she looked on. She could also see a few small settlements here and there as well as the boarded steps of pulley and lever systems that indicate mines.

That was when a shadow passed over them and when she turned around, she gasped at the sight of what could only be Ul’dah.

The city was made of stone, but unlike the kind in Limsa, this was a warm sandstone that grew far larger than the shining white stone that overlooked the ocean. And with the light from an early sunset, it hit the stone in such a way that it shone just like gold. The palaces and spires glimmered in the fading sunlight like variegated jewels set upon a golden crown as it stood over the desert sands that surrounded it.

She could not help but stare all around her as they flew in lower over the city, suddenly surrounded by the city on all sides that she didn’t even realize they were landing until they came to a stop. She quickly disembarked and began searching around once again, wondering just where she should go to speak with the Flame General.

To her relief, she found another soldier waiting for her, ready to direct her on where to go. She approached the large man in a dark uniform of navy blue and bore a different insignia upon his chest—one of a set of scales that was balanced with a ball of fire and a small jewel.

After explaining her reasons for being her, he quickly saluted her and said, “Welcome to Ul’dah, madam. We have indeed been expecting you. Flame General Raubahn will receive you in the Fragrant Chamber. Please take the lift down to the Hustings Strip and speak with Bartholomew at the Royal Promenade.”

She thanked him and was heading off towards the lift, which took her to the Hustings Strip. She quickly realized that most of this city was made of perfectly sculpted stone and full of many staircases and tunnels so that it felt like she was running underground almost.

She knew that with the sun going down, she didn’t have too much time to really explore the city like she did in Gridania. Just so that she didn’t keep anyone waiting any longer than they had to, she decided to deliver the final letter before she could get to exploring.

She wandered through the crowds upon the Hustings Strip to where her feet soon carried her to thick, red carpet and to a more regal-looking part of the city. She wandered about different landings until she found her steps carried to a flight of grand stairs that led to a pair of enormous doors. This had to be the place.

As she approached the doors, she saw two guards dressed in armor so bright that it shone like silver. When they questioned her for being here, she told them to seek out Bartholomew, who saluted at his name.

“`The Lominsan envoy, I presume?’” he asked, “Would you be so good as to allow me to inspect the missive you bear, madam? My thanks.”
Claire reached into her bag again and pulled out the second letter which bore the name: Raubahn Aldynn.

After looking over it, she saw Bartholomew nod before handing it back to her.

“Yes, here is the seal of the Admiral,” he said, “Please proceed.”

She thanked him as they stood back and opened the large doors for her where she found herself in a grand hall that was well lit and extravagantly built. There were beautiful pillars built around them that flanked the hall as an enormous table made of stone was set up in the very center of this place. The walls were also cloaked in silk banners, with the symbol of the scales balanced by the jewel and flames that stood at the head of the hall.

As soon as she entered, two figures were there in the middle of a discussion—and they looked up immediately as they heard her enter. One of them was a tall Elezen woman dressed in the same dark uniform that the guard who greeted her wore. She had a rather kind but professional smile on as she approach. But her eyes were drawn to the second figure of the man who stood next to her.

“Ah, a guest from Limsa. I thought I smelled stale ale,” he said with a grin before adding, “I won’t hold it against you. If you’re half the warrior Merlwyb says, ‘tis a wonder you don’t reek of dead Sahagin.”

It was him…?

She supposed that a part of her was expecting this after her surprise at seeing the Elder Seedseer. But the same man she saw in her vision before was also standing before her. He looked much like how he did five years ago… a tall, powerfully built man with brown braids and a scraggily beard stood before her, with thick scars over his face and massive arms that looked like they could snap a normal person’s head off their neck with one flick if he wanted to. But there was a warm smile on his face and his greeting was boisterous and energetic—which led her to realize that he was a gentle giant.

Claire couldn’t hide the smile at that as she observed the slight twinkle in his eyes that almost didn’t seem to match the strong warrior he looked.

“Welcome to the sultanate of Ul’dah. I am Raubahn Aldynn, General of the Immortal Flames,” he said welcomingly. He then grinned and added, “But you did not come all this way to exchange formalities.”

She grinned back, liking him just as much as she liked the Admiral and the Elder Seedseer. She then handed over the letter she brought for him and watched as he tore it open and scanned over it. Once he was done, she saw some of his rowdy happiness fade at whatever was written there.

“…Carteneau,” she heard him whisper with a thoughtful bitterness. “Aye, I remember bloody Carteneau.” He looked up at her. “Do you know what happened that day, adventurer? When we took the field against the Garleans?”

She nodded, recalling to the moment she had seen him at Carteneau that day and how he led his fellows upon the battlefield… and she wondered just how many of those scars were from that day?

At her answer, she saw a faint twitch of his lips as he said, “So my counterparts have educated you.”

She nodded again before remembering Kan-E-Senna and told him, “I had just left Gridania where I
met the Elder Seedseeer, and asked that I pass along her regards to you. Also... she had a message. That her pet wolf must be brought to heel and she asks for your opinion on it.”

She saw him blink before he raised his eyebrows in understanding.

“Hm? Kan-E’s pet is giving her trouble, is it?” he said in the same thoughtful bitterness he used when he recalled Carteneau. “Well, she should already know my mind on that subject. Wolves are beyond taming. ‘Tis but a matter of time before they bare their teeth.”

She felt that she was missing something here, but he didn’t go into details on that. Instead, she watched as he shook his head and told her, “So it was with the Garleans, fifty years ago. No sooner had they learned how to use magitek than they began seizing territory from their neighbors. Led by then Legatus Solus zos Galvuz, they swiftly brought the other nations of Ilsabard to heel. And so the legatus became an emperor, and his republic an empire... An empire which then set its sights upon Eorzea.”

That was when his assistant spoke up, reminding them, “But the conquering emperor is now an old man of four score winters. His health is failing, and he has no clear successor. Like as not, this is why the Garleans have been quiet of late.”

Raubahn snorted at that, as if he doubted that very much.

“But the XIVth Imperial Legion is still entrenched within our borders. And their commander, Legatus Gaius van Baelsar, has long harbored ambitions of conquest,” he countered back, sounding more than a little concerned on this subject as he added, “Were he to strike now, I fear we would fall like so many others before us. And not only Ul’dah, but Gridania and Limsa Lominsa as well. For the Calamity brought the lot of us to our knees, and we’ve yet to get up. We barely have the strength to stand against the beast tribes, never mind the primals they mean to summon. We are a realm divided, adventurer. An alliance in name only.”

There was that term again... primals. She wanted to ask, but knew better. She was sent here to deliver a message to the other nations and set a good example for Limsa. That was when Raubahn growled a little as he raised a hand to his chin and said, perhaps a little more to himself than to them, “But the wolf cares not for the plight of its prey. The Garleans stir, and the Elder Seedseeer would not let it go unnoticed.”

Oh, now she understood that line about the wolf. Kan-E-Senna wasn’t talking about an actual wolf... she was warning the General that the Garleans were starting to cause trouble for them again after five years. Very clever... though it seemed that they were stuck on how to handle this situation.

“All other concerns pale in comparison to the Empire,” he stated, coming back to reality. “Even the beast tribes and their bloody primals. We must stand united once more, that much is clear. And if we’re to do so, we must remember the cause which last brought us together. Merlwyb will have her memorial.”

Claire nodded with a kind smile as he raised his fist and declared proudly, “We will honor the memory of the fallen. We will remind the people what their brothers and sisters fought and died for!”

She stood their patiently as he stepped over to the table and she saw how he wrote down in a powerful hand a missive similar to the one that the Elder Seedseeer wrote and handed it to his assistant.
She tucked it away safely as she questioned, “Shall I inform the sultana and the Syndicate?”

He nodded as he added, “I shall speak with Her Grace myself.”

“Very good, sir,” the woman replied before she saluted and he turned to face Claire once more.

“The Admiral will have my reply anon,” he promised, “My thanks to you, adventurer.”

Claire bowed with a smile, knowing her part was done.

“You are welcomed here in Ul’dah any time,” he said as he escorted her to the door and held it open for her, “May Thal grant you great bounty in the future.”

She left, head held high, knowing that she had carried out her role and she felt that she had done a worthy job of a title. Now with the letters all delivered and the entire realm now open to her, she was now ready to head out and explore more to see what was waiting for her.

As she walked out the doors and stood on the steps, she was now debating with herself on what she should do first? Well, find the main aetheryte in Ul’dah and explore more of the city came first to mind. She was eager to see what guilds were here in the desert. Just before she wandered off however, the guard she spoke to before—Bartholomew—called her over to him.

Curious, she stepped up as he gave a little bow of respect to her.

“Ah, my lady envoy,” he said. “I trust your stay in the sultanate has been pleasant. Now, if you do not mind my asking, do you perchance have plans to visit Limsa Lominsa in the near future?”

“Mayhaps,” she responded politely, wondering what he was about to say. “Why do you ask?”

A look of great relief passed over his face as he confessed quickly, “In that case, I have information that may be of interest to you. I once accompanied the Flame General on an official visit to the seaside city-state, during which time I became acquainted with Baderon, the proprietor of the Drowning Wench. Well, the man sent word just now that he has a job for a capable adventurer. I can think of none with better credentials than you. Baderon would doubtless be pleased were you to offer your services.”

Truly? She had been gone not even a full day and trouble was already beginning to brew in her absence? Well, it was too late to leave now, but she nodded in understanding, promising him she would leave the city at first light. But before that, she asked if there was an inn that she could stay in for the night.

He pointed her down to the Ruby Road Exchange, where the inn known as the Quicksand would be waiting with plenty of comfortable rooms. Yet as she wandered down through the streets, she found herself no longer tired in the least. Not when there was an entire city for her to explore. So, she decided to forgo sleep this night and began to see where her feet would carry her now. She wandered through the vast stone streets. Even with the sun long having gone down and everything cloaked in night, there were still many people out enjoying themselves.

The heat had gone down considerably, and she actually found this desert city surprisingly cold. She noticed many wealthy citizens about, dressed in the finest of silk robes and glittering jewelry… but at the same time, she could also make out those more unfortunate souls who were very poor and dressed in hardly more than rags. She knew that each city had their own fair share of problems and that there was always bound to be a gap between the rich and the poor—but here in this city it seemed more clearer than it had in Limsa or Gridania.
The people, rich or poor, didn’t really pay much attention to a random adventurer however, which she was grateful for. It allowed her to move in peace through the crowd as she stared up at the cloudy sky and wondered how everything would look during the day?

She soon found the Aetheryte Crystal spinning within an enclave of more stone, and with her attuned to it, she was certain to leave whenever she desired. But she chose to explore more of the guilds she could find here. That was when she discovered that there were more in this city than in the others… such as a pugilist guild where she could learn to fight with her fists… there was also the gladiator guild inside the coliseum where they specialized in the way of the sword. As she passed by several crafting guilds in the form of the weavers and the goldsmith guilds she wondered what she could learn if she chose to take up mining as she passed by a sign that held the symbol of a pickaxe? There was so much to see that she couldn’t hope to get a glimpse of everything in just one night.

Before she really knew it, the sky was growing lighter and she knew the sun would be up soon. Though she was now feeling the effects of a sleepless night, she took it all in stride as she teleported straight back to Limsa, ready to see what new task that Baderon had for her.

But as she climbed the familiar landings towards the Drowning Wench, she could not help but wonder what a strange coincidence this all was. That the moment she finished with her duty as envoy, a new request all the way from Limsa had arrived and just happened to be passed onto her right away?

She pushed it out of her mind as a mere coincidence as she approached Baderon, who was thrilled at the sight of her—and even more so when she told him of how she learned that he was looking for a capable adventurer to help in this ‘problem’ of his.

“I thank ye fer takin' the time to 'elp me out, lass,” he told her sincerely, “Now, I'm sure yer busy, so I'll come straight to the point. Word 'as it some suspicious-lookin' buggers 'ave been sneakin' in an' out o' Sastasha Seagrot, an' I need a trustworthy sort to 'ead up north of Aleport and find out who they are an' what they're up to.”

Sastasha? She had to admit that she never heard of such a place. But she knew where Aleport was and was sure she could figure out her way there on her own.

He shook his head at this as he confessed, “Don't sound like much, I know... But it weren't so long ago as the fishbacks' pet pirates paid us an unwelcome visit, an' folk are feelin' a bit nervous.”

“If you would permit me, Master Baderon,” called a familiar voice, “I should be happy to elaborate.”

She turned to see Commodore Reyner himself appearing out of seemingly nowhere and was smiling when he saw her.

“Well, well, if it ain't the chief Yellowjacket 'imself,” Baderon laughed at the sight of seeing him there, “To what do I owe this rare 'onor, Commodore Reyner? Come to make sure me patrons are behavin'-- or just thirsty?”

Reyner laughed as well, telling him that he had come for neither, but to pass along whatever information he knew so far to the ‘adventuring volunteer’ though he confessed he was relieved to see that it was her.

“And if it ain't the chief Yellowjacket 'imself,” Baderon smiled.”

“Well, well, if it ain't the chief Yellowjacket 'imself,” Baderon laughed at the sight of seeing him there, “To what do I owe this rare 'onor, Commodore Reyner? Come to make sure me patrons are behavin'-- or just thirsty?”

“Over the course of the past moon, there have been several sightings of an unfamiliar vessel off the coast of Aleport, in the vicinity of the Isles of Umbra,” he began to explain, and though she didn’t
know anything about these Isles of Umbra, she nodded in understanding. “This information came to my attention no more than a few weeks after a squad of my own soldiers had completed a routine patrol of the region, Sastasha Seagrot included. Their search revealed little, save that a family of coeurls had taken up residence in the caves. Nothing to concern us, in short. In light of recent developments, however, it would seem wise to search Sastasha again.”

He let out a bitter sigh as he added, “But with the Sahagin testing our defenses daily, I am loath to assign the task to the limited forces at my disposal. Our line is stretched as it is.”

He then gestured to her and finished up, “Thus I sought the services of a competent adventurer to conduct an investigation in our stead. Any aid you can offer in this matter would be greatly appreciated.”

She nodded, ready to dive into this Sastasha. While she was still new to adventuring, she had heard that many adventurers tended to dive straight into old ruins and crumbling dungeons for rare loot or treasure. She had long since been wanting her chance to explore one as well and it seemed her wait was finally over.

Commodore Reyner beamed at her agreement and said in a more cheerful voice, “Then it is settled. Sastasha is located in western La Noscea. For more detailed instructions on how to reach the place, I suggest you consult V’mellpa. She can be found at the ferry docks on the lower decks.”

“You ‘eard the man!” Baderon laughed, reaching over the counter to shake her hand with a big grin on his face, “Good luck to ye, lass!”

“Thank you,” she smiled at them both once more before she turned on her heel and was now eager to see what would be waiting for her in her first dungeon. She headed straight down to Fisherman’s Bottom to where she knew the ferry was waiting for her. She soon spotted the soldier standing on the deck and looking around.

“You're here about Commodore Reyner's investigation, yeah?” she asked, and continued upon Claire's nod. “Then you'll want to board a ferry bound for Aleport. Once you arrive in western La Noscea, head to the north and you'll come across Sastasha Seagrot soon enough. We have a scout stationed by the entrance to the cave with orders to brief you on the situation.”

And it was with no small amount of pushing did she direct her to the small sailing boat to the side, ready to set sail for Aleport. The journey was a very short one… taking only enough time for the sun to finish rising and cast its warm glow across the sparkling sea by the time that they came to Aleport’s docks with a gentle bump. After climbing out, she continued on North, taking a small path that she never took before. She wasn’t sure what she would fine, only that she would ask the first Yellowjacket she came across if she was in the right place.

Thankfully, she spotted one inside a small enclosure of stone that led to the entrance of a cave. Figuring this was the right place, she stepped inside, noticing that there were already a few people there outside it. She saw a young woman, who was about her age, looking after a more elderly man, who was wheezing slightly… and a small group of adventurers huddled together. A girl dressed in the same sort of clothes that she had seen the conjurers in Gridania wearing was doubled over as she gasped for breath… as if having just run here from a great distance.

The others seemed to be taunting and poking fun at her as she apologized for taking so long. But Claire walked straight to the entrance of the cave where the Yellowjacket on guard looked greatly uneasy.

“Please tell me you're here on Yellowjacket duty, and not some daft sod out for a stroll. I can't take
any more of this blasted waiting,” he begged when he saw her there.

She shrugged at that, knowing that it was half true and merely explained, “Not quite. But I am here to investigate the cave for the Commodore.”

“You are?” he gasped, then let out a sigh of great relief, “Thank the gods. I assume you already know about the ship seen slipping around the Isles of Umbra?”

Before even waiting to hear her answer he went on, “We’ve been on the lookout for pirate activity ever since that vessel was sighted, thinking a crew of cutthroats might have a den nearby. So when we received word that men of questionable quality had been seen passing in and out of Sastasha here, we weren’t entirely surprised. I’ve yet to see them for myself, but if this lot belong to the fishback-fancying Serpent Reavers... Well, you can imagine the panic it would cause.”

Ah yes, she had yet to forget the Serpent Reavers, and knew that this sort of thing would not be what the people needed. She could only imagine the fear that must be sweeping across the city at that moment if they thought the Serpent Reavers were still around.

“The kidnappings are still fresh in people's minds,” the Yellowjacket added with another sigh as he turned around to look into the cave once more. Claire looked past him to see that the cave seemed to stretch downwards and probably led deep into the earth. She could hear the sounds of water dripping and a slight echoing of wind that told her that where she was going would be very deep and very wet... she wasn’t looking forward to that.

“Anyway, your task is to poke around in the caves, and find out exactly what we're dealing with,” he said to her, “While you do that, I'll be keeping watch out here...praying you don't spot any blue face tattoos.”

Well, at least he was honest in his obvious dislike of the place. He wished her luck once more as she took a deep breath and checked her supply of potions once more before she took her first step inside. She wandered down a steep incline, having to do more climbing than actual walking at this point until it led to an almost vertical wall that she was slipping down. Her hands passed over the wet stone before her feet came in contact with a rocky floor and she stepped away to wander through a tunnel before coming out into a large open area.

The cavern she was standing in was not at all what she was expecting. Instead of the dark and dingy gloom, she was standing in a series of caves and tunnels that were filled with brightly colored pieces of coral and twinkling lights hovering over strange plantlife. She could see that the cave floor was dotted with vents that seemed to be blowing out either steam or sparkling aqua-blue lights that were twisting and turning in the air. She could see also bright green motes that reminded her of fireflies dancing overhead as they hovered across the pathway she stood upon, and twinkled in and out of sight as they crossed over the caverns.

The first creature she came across were actually a few bats that flew at her head when she drew too close. While small enough to avoid, she set her carbuncle upon them as she journey on ahead. She could smell seawater just up ahead and the stench of seaweed soon followed suite as she came to a fork in the road. She turned and ran on path which led her to a dead end. A large, open cavern with broken boards upon the floor as if someone took a large barrel or crate and smashed it here.

She was about to turn back to take the other path when she noticed something sticking out of the broken boards and it caught her eye. Curious, she walked over to it and pushed over the broken pieces of wood to find a bloodstained scrap of parchment laying underneath it. There was a message scrawled upon it in faded ink but she could still make out one phrase: The Capten lykes his wyne Redd.
She rolled her eyes as she dropped the parchment and turned around, heading back the way she came and took the next path. She found more bats waiting for her, before moving on to find a few a few large aurelia floating about almost innocently. She tried to sneak by them to avoid killing if she could, but they spotted her almost right away and still went for her. While a little more dangerous than the bats had been, it wasn’t long before she left them in oozing piles of jelly upon the floor.

She went deeper into the cavern, passing by wisps and crabs until she came out into a much more open area that was filled with water and bright coral that supported her weight. She stepped up to the bright stepping stones before more wisps that were hovering about her head came right for her. She ducked and cut them down, not able to stand more than one or two hits. The problem was though that they were multiplying and she found herself struggling to fight off fire from all sides… until she saw that they were coming from a large clam. She went for it… only to find that its closed mouth was impossible for her to break into. She was starting to get frustrated until the mouth opened suddenly to let out more of the wisps and her carbuncle attacked it once more… this time doing actual damage before its jaw shut again. Realizing that she merely had to wait for it to open its mouth again, she dealt with the wisps and was ready when the clam exposed its mouth for a second time.

She could tell it was dead when the jaw slapped shut and the color seemed to fade from its shell. Brushing off some of the soot on her robes she crossed over the water, taking care not to fall in as more wisps and crabs began to come after her. Knowing how to deal with the clams now was very easy so she passed over the water until she came to a seemingly dead end. She looked around, knowing that she couldn’t have gotten lost… there was all but one path that she could have taken. Aside from that one crate and the message, there were no signs of Sahagin or pirates waiting for her. All she could see as she walked up through this dead end to the solid wall were a few pillars of bright coral standing around her. Now what?

She ran her hand over the wall, almost ready to turn back and see if she could find some other clues that she missed… only to realize that there was something in the rock. She paused at that, running her hand over it a few times before realizing that it was some kind of fake stone placed over it. Excited, she pulled at it… only nothing happened.

She frowned as she looked around, trying to figure out what she was supposed to do. If there was a false piece of stone here, there had to be some kind of entrance. She was sure of that much, but how was she to get it to work. She approached one of the coral clusters and ran her hand over it… but as soon as she touched the blue one… there was a strange hiss and she turned around in time to see a large aurelia appearing seemingly out of nowhere. She reacted on instinct and fired a spell at it, but this one was a little tougher than the last few she fought and it took a little while to bring it down.

What was that? All she did was touch that coral and…?

Oh, she was starting to put it all together now. The coral had to be some sort of code that she needed to get that switch to work. And if she got it right, then maybe…? She went back to the rock in the wall to try it again… but she found nothing. She was sure that she was onto it though and gave more thought to it… so the blue one wasn’t the right one, which left either green or red…

Red…

Wait… that message!

“The Captain likes his wine red,” she recited to herself. Most pirates that she knew didn’t drink any old wine… they went for the hard stuff. Pure rum. That note wasn’t just some meaningless phrase
that some drunken pirate wrote down in a haze, it had to be some sort of code. Red… it was worth a shot and she went over to run her hand over the pulsating red coral. She then heard a faint click as she found the right spot before the false stone fell away to reveal a sort of switch in the stone. Feeling proud of herself, she went over to press it to see what kind of door would open when…?

She heard a rustle of plants moving and a faint growl as she spun about in time to see a large coeurl come leaping out from the brush and went straight for her.

She should have known that it was never going to be that easy.

She ducked in time as the coeurl punched at her, dodging the swipe of its enormous paws before she danced away as it continued to snarl viciously. It was fairly easy for her to deal with it though, able to sense when to back away in time for its more powerful attacks and was actually surprised by how easy it was for it to fall.

Dusting off her hands she went back to the switch and pulled at it. Just then, a part of the wall slid upwards to reveal another path. As she cautiously stuck her head inside, she could make out the barrels, crates, piles of ropes and lanterns all set up and she didn’t need to guess who had been the ones who set these here. She moved more slowly at that point, making sure to look around every corner carefully before she went ahead.

She knew she already found enough proof that the Serpent Reavers were using this place, but she could not resist going down further to see what else she could find. Finally, she looked down another corner to find one of the Reavers pacing the floor with a pair of large guard dogs with him.

Unfortunately, the dogs spotted her right away and flew over to attack her, getting the attention of the Reaver. She moved out and was willing to take them all down before running down the corridor. She quickly found more Reavers, having to dodge an arrow as another group of pirates charged in for an attack.

This was certainly more exciting than she thought it would be.

Down she went, finding a massive wooden gate—which turned out to be locked—before she moved down another pathway. She wasn’t entirely sure if she was going the right way, but she knew that she had little choice in this matter. She soon came across another wide open area where a pirate stood in a similar outfit that Commodore Reyner had been wearing… only nowhere near as finely pressed and proud as his was. Still, she could not help but think that maybe he was the captain in this case—especially since he seemed to be giving orders to the other two Reavers in front of him.

The other two Reavers were easy enough to defeat, but she had more difficulty with the captain. All the while, a small pink parrot upon his shoulder let out cries that did not help matters.

“Captain is strong! Captain is strong!” it would squawk… at least until the pirate seemed to sense that he stood no chance of winning on his own and turned tail. He opened the gate for her and dashed down through it, leaving her a little stunned by what happened. But she gave chase anyway, not willing to let him get away. She came across another cavern at the end of the tunnel, this one full of wood and supplies. She could see several tables set up that were full of rum and food… only for her to walk right into a trap.

The captain ran past them and she ended up running right into a handful of more pirates. Cursing to herself, she had no choice but to let him go, especially when she realized that there were a handful of young women cowering at all the fighting.
After taking down the dog and the two other Reavers, she turned to one of the cowering girls and asked her if she was alright. The girl looked up frightfully before bursting into tears.

“Please… please don’t hurt us,” she begged.

“Us?” Claire repeated softly, finding it hard to believe that she was with these pirates. That was when the girl quickly told her that there were many other young maidens being held here. Most of them were kept prisoner long enough to be sold off to other pirate crews and that they had no choice but to do whatever they were told.

Claire looked at her… and found that she believed what she said.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” she promised. “Where are the others?”

She then quickly explained that all the girls that they captured were being held in this cavern… most behind locked gates.

“Them pirates’ ‘ave the keys,” she explained, hiccupping into tears.

Claire took the time to dry her tears, telling her to go back the way she came along the path. “I cleared it out of all monsters and pirates,” she promised. “There will be a Yellowjacket waiting at the entrance. He’ll help you out. I’ll help free the others, alright?”

The girl nodded, tears in her eyes as she got up and bolted down the path that Claire came from. Soon enough, Claire found even more pirates waiting for her. The dogs were easy enough to take down, but she soon found out that a few of the pirates did have keys on them. After taking down the first wave of pirates, she fished out a key before heading to check some of the tunnels that stretched off in all directions. She made sure to check each and every hidden passage, usually finding a few pirates standing guard outside locked gates—where she knew that girl had been speaking the truth.

After defeating more pirates, she opened the gates to find many more young girls being held hostage. Many of them were very weak and on the verge of death… but they cried in relief when they saw that she was not a Reaver coming to collect them. Instead, she helped them to stand as she told them the same instructions as the first girl and to just make for the entrance. Those who could walk helped those who couldn’t and soon began to make their way to the entrance. Eventually, Claire found that there were only two closed gates left… both of them being guarded.

Claire went straight up towards one of the gates where two guards stood waiting for her and Claire felt anger boiling inside at the sight of those poor girls behind held in such a place. The pirates didn’t stand a chance as she knocked them both out and used one of the keys to open this gate. There were several more girls being held here, many of them looking frightened as she came in and they backed away. But there was another pirate inside… the largest one yet, with a great bald head and covered in tattoos like his fellows as he downed an entire bottle of rum.

He let out a roar of surprise and anger as he made his way drunkenly towards her. Good news is that since he was drunk he couldn’t deal a solid blow against her and was just swinging his axe around… the bad news was that since he was drunk it was harder for him to go down since he couldn’t feel anything.

It was with some irritation that he was finally knocked over, not even aware of what hit him before she saw a small key fall out of the pouch at his side. Deciding to take it, she scooped it up before calling to the girls that if they wanted to escape, now was their chance. They bolted for the exit as
she made her way towards the final guarded gate… where the two finally noticed that something was going on. They charged at her, falling to her spells easily enough, before Claire began to try keys on the final locked gate here. She found that none of them worked… at least until she decided to try the key she won from that drunkard pirate moments before.

To her relief, she saw the gate open wide for her and she went running down the path once more, stopping only to deal with the guard dogs that wandered the halls, looking for food. Eventually, she came across another wide open area where the captain from before was now telling his men to stay on guard for the ‘intruder’. At least until he looked up and went white at the sight of her there.

The other two pirates laughed when they saw her, however, thinking that they were twice her size she couldn’t possibly be a threat to them. It was with no small amount of satisfaction then when she unleashed another spell and watched the smug grins being wiped off their faces almost at once. As soon as those two crumbled, the captain opened another door and a pack of vicious dogs came snarling inside. She had to focus on these dogs as the captain made another attempt to escape; his pet parrot still squawking the whole way as it followed right behind.

After she killed the final dog, she spun about and gave chase, growing tired of running through these dank tunnels and wanted to get out again as soon as she could. When she stepped into this next tunnel though, she realized that the smell of saltwater was stronger than ever and then she finally arrived into a hollow inlet, where she could see bits of the sky in the distance. It looked like they were just in a cave at the shoreline, for there was a large ship docked out upon the water, and she could now see how the Reavers were able to come and go as they wished.

She looked down to see more pirates blocking her path, but from this angle, she realized she did not have to fight them all off. So, she stuck to one side of the cave wall before she fought her way towards the very edge of the sea…

Just as she was wondering if it would be possible for her to jump in and swim out of here, she caught a loud hissing sound and turned to see something rising out of the sea. The captain who fled from her twice now was on his knees before a towering, amphibian-like figure. It was more than three time the man’s size, covered with thick, dark scales and piercing yellow eyes as it glared down at the man.

Claire hid behind a stone as she watched the creature marching towards the captain—realizing that she was getting her first real glimpse at a Sahagin. It was able to speak in a tongue she recognized… however there was something strange about its voice, as if there was water in his throat and so his words bubbled and spit in a long hiss, “You shully our shpawning groundssss, shorewalker!”

Claire realized what it was going to do before the captain did. He tried to get up to his feet to run… only for the Sahagin to strike it down with a halberd made of items that were fished out of the sea. The captain who fled from her twice now was on his knees before a towering, amphibian-like figure. It was more than three time the man’s size, covered with thick, dark scales and piercing yellow eyes as it glared down at the man.

Claire merely marched forward, knowing that she couldn’t let this guy go free. It let out a gurgle of furious rage and amusement at her as she ran towards him.

“Finlessss fool!” it shrieked as it swiped at her. Claire moved this way and then slipping behind it as she aimed for its slimy-looking hide. She only continued to move around it as she ducked and weaved around to avoid its weapon. At some point, she could sense something right below her, and that was when she realized that there were several vents around her where water was bubbling up and she realized that something was coming up from below. Having a very good idea what they were, she stunned the Sahagin captain long enough to get to two of the vents and find a way to block it. But she wasn’t fast enough for the other two and a pair of smaller Sahagin appeared from
the vents. They hissed and charged at her just as the captain was knocked out of his stunned state. She was now left dealing with all three of them with just herself and her carbuncle friend at her side.

The other two were smaller and easier to deal with before she turned her full attention upon the larger one once more. She had to focus on him or this wasn’t going to end. On and on this went, with her now trying to hurry this up when she sensed another presence below her. She would cast poison spells upon it while striking it with more dangerous Ruin and attack spells… making sure to drain him of aether when she felt her own drawing low. It was a cycle that she fell into immediately as she allowed herself to dance across the wet floor.

Thankfully, she was able to find a way to get through those thick scales and deal a crippling blow that put a stop to it. With one last burbling howl of pain, she watched as the Sahagin fell, hitting the stone with a loud thump… water and blood dripping from between the scales as it glared at her with those lifeless eyes.

She set her grimoire to her side and let out a sigh of relief to know that she completed the duty. Tired and ready for some food and rest, she left the caverns behind, returning back to the entrance rather calmly and climbed back out into the bright sunlight, having to blink a few times before she was able to see again.

The Yellowjacket let out a cry of relief and joy when he saw her, helping her out and shaking her hand over and over again. He had begun to worry as the girls from before suddenly flocked out and told him what happened.

“We will do a full exploration of the caverns ourselves to make sure that no one else is left behind,” he told her, “The girls are being looked after right now.”

Claire nodded, glad to hear that as he told her to return to Baderon and tell him that everything has been solved. That was when the Yellowjacket pushed a few coins into her hand and told her to get a few pints of ale—on him.

She laughed as she thanked him and left, feeling weary and was soaked to the bone. She had dried off mostly by the time she returned to the Drowning Wench, to where Baderon was waiting for her… while speaking to a group of adventurers—all of whom were looking a little put out.

She approached them just as she heard Baderon saying to them, “Aye, such a task was on the books,” he said, “Was’, mind. I’m afraid that ship ‘as already sailed, friend.”

As she approached, they turned to look at her, just as their leader, a large Roegadyn in armor, spotted her there. And after taking in her wet and messy appearance he said, “Ah… Might you be the adventurer who accepted the job of investigating Sastasha?”

Was rumor of that already being spread around? It wasn’t like she could deny it though, so she nodded and the man sighed in great disappointment and shook his head.

“It would seem that ship has not only sailed, but now returns to harbor, none the worse for its voyage,” he stated, “A pity. We dragged our boots too long on this one.”

She wasn’t sure what he was talking about as one of his companions—a Miqo’te lass—and she said encouragingly, “No matter. The wheel will turn and our chance will come.”

At that, the Roegadyn laughed, already looking cheered up as he said in a booming voice, “You are right, of course. But there shall be no rest till we have attained our goal, lofty though it may
“Not a wink of sleep, great leader!” piped up the third member of their group, a Lalafell mage, jumping up and down and said eagerly.

That was when the Roegadyn nodded in full agreement before he looked back to Claire and explained, “Our aim, lest you wonder, is to perform such feats of heroism as will earn us a place in the songs of every alehouse in Eorzea. We mean to write a legend which will inspire adventurers as yet unborn to follow our shining example.”

“A lofty goal,” she agreed with him. “I wish you the best of luck.”

“Do you have such a goal?” he asked, and as she opened her mouth to answer, he went on speaking before she could say anything, “Large or small, it matters not. Only have a star to reach for and you will reach higher. Purpose can sustain you through times of hardship. Keep your eye on the prize, and all obstacles will be overcome in time. You would not think to stride into battle un clad, would you? Well, goals are as arms and armor for the spirit! I wish you fortune in your endeavors, milady!”

She gave a slight chuckle as she nodded and he gave a friendly salute before the three of them left. Claire turned wearily back to Baderon, who was watching her with a friendly grin, shaking his head in amusement at what he just saw.

“Back then, are ye?” he asked as he looked her up and down to make sure she was still in one piece, “With all yer limbs, an' a tale to tell, I'll wager.”

She nodded and so explained what happened when she dove into Sastasha and what she found down there. It only took about ten minutes for her to explain everything, with him actually grabbing the nearest bottle of ale he had and pouring himself a drink.

When she was done, his cheerfulness looked more pensive as he muttered, “Fishbacks? An' here I was thinkin' ye'd only 'ave to crack a pirate skull or three. Seven hells... Ye turn yer back fer five bloody minutes, an' the scaly bastards've set up shop on yer bleedin' doorstep...” But then he started to grin as he added, “Still, sounds like ye left 'em in pieces, so I don't s'pose they'll be carryin' out whatever mischief they was plannin'-- unless they was plannin' on feedin' 'emselves to the fauna o' Sastasha, o' course!”

The two laughed together before Baderon nodded approvingly, heaping more praise upon her before finishing up, “Anyroad, all's well that ends well! On behalf of Limsa, I thank ye fer sheddin' some light on this mystery. Ye've lived up to yer reputation, an' I couldn't ask fer no more'n that.”

Good, she was glad to hear that. Now that it was out of her way, she was ready for some rest before she went back to exploring the world. She was in half a mind to head over to Gridania again when he suddenly thought of something and spoke.

“Now, I'll bet yer dyin' for a rest, but just in case yer not, I was wonderin' if ye might be interested in takin' on another job? It just so 'appens that I've 'ad a request from our sister guild in Gridania, see,” he told her, “Seems the forest folk're in need of a 'venturer what can get things done. Fer them to ask fer 'elp like this, ye can bet the task won't be no skip through a sunny glade. But after the way ye dealt with our fishback infestation, I doubt it's anythin' ye can't 'andle. Give us a shout when yer ready, an' I'll lay it out for ye.”

She thought it all over for a moment, but she decided that she would at least hear him out—curious to what this next duty would involve. If worst comes to worst, she could always refuse. But if she
was already heading towards Gridania…?

She nodded, wanting to hear more about Gridania’s request.

Meanwhile, behind her, another figure was watching over her.

“More effectively handled it could not have been,” Y’shtola purred to herself as she thought it all over. “The underwater caves cleared out of pirates and Sahagin both, captives rescued and no more need to worry about what else is happening there. We could not have clear this matter up better if we tried.” She then reached for her linkpearl and said into it, “’Tis I again. No, I am merely informing you that the worry that the Sahagin may be plotting to summon their primal has been dealt with.”

She was silent as she listened to the other end before shaking her head.

“Nay, t’was not I who dealt with it,” she said as she turned and looked around the corner of the place to see the adventurer listening to Baderon intently. “It was an adventurer. Yes, the same one I’ve been telling you about.”

She remained quiet until she saw Claire leave the counter, with Baderon giving her a friendly wave. She merely watched as she headed towards the lift and she had a very good idea of where she was going.

“Also, I believe that the trouble that Yda and Papalymo have warned us about in the Deecraft will soon be addressed,” she said as she turned and walked away. “I’ll explain more when I next see you. But if I am right in where she is going, I’ll be passing along your regards to those two troublemakers soon. If you hear from them before that however, pray tell them to meet me in Gridania… I’m making my way there as we speak.”
Chapter Summary

After dealing with the mess of pirates in Limsa, we are now bound for Gridania to deal with... the undead and cultists? Well, no one can say that this job will be boring at any rate. Meanwhile, we are still being watched from around every corner... only what do they want from us?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Claire was already taking another airship back to Gridania, allowing her body to rest from her little venture into Sastasha. She yawned, feeling the price for not getting rest the night before. Still, she was eager to see what this next job was all about.

“Ready to 'ear about that job, then?'”, Baderon asked her with a grin. “Like I said, the request comes from our sister guild in Gridania.” He then came to a brief pause before adding, “...An' that's all I know. But whatever it is ye get asked to do, I some'ow doubt it'd pose any trouble fer a 'venturer as survived the bedlam in Sastasha. If ye think ye might be interested, ye'll want to 'ave words with Mother Miounne, me counterpart in Gridania. Good luck, lass!”

Well, that seemed simple enough, but she couldn’t help but wonder just what job would cause this Mother Miounne to seek aid from other guilds to see it done? As far as she could see, Eorzea was not short on adventurers… so what could be so bad that most would pass it up?

Such thoughts soon slipped her mind as they flew on through the sky. Eventually, she had fallen into a slight doze the rest of the journey, only waking with a start when they came in to land and a slight bump. Rubbing her tired eyes, she left the landing and hurried up the stairs to the main hall of the Carline Canopy, feeling curiosity burning inside her. She wasn’t sure who to ask when she came up top… but she saw that standing behind a desk was a lovely woman with short hair and a kind face as she was looking over a familiar-looking book. She then recognized it as a sort of journal that kept track of all the names of adventurers in it—Baderon keep one just like.

Figuring that this was Mother Miounne, she approached the desk; where Miounne seemed to sense that someone was there and didn’t bother looking up from the register as she said automatically, “Take a seat wherever you like, friend. Our waitress will come to take your--”

She then looked up, as Claire then calmly explained why she was here and she saw Miounne’s eyes widen in pleasant surprise.

“Here at Baderon's suggestion, you say?” she asked before chuckling, “The foul-mouthed rogue sends me word that an adventurer might be along for the job! Well, this makes things a lot easier, doesn't it?”

She then gave her a big smile as she crossed her arms and said, “With regard to the task in question, dear, there is a fair bit to tell. Let me know when you're ready to hear the details, and I shall brief you.”
Claire only nodded, feeling excitement rushing through her blood once more as she leaned in to listen.

“Ah, good!” Miounne said with a smile. “Now then, here’s the long and short of it…”

Before she could begin, however, another voice cut her off by calling, “Beg pardons for interrupting, Miounne, but our need grows ever more pressing. Have none stepped forward?”

Both of them looked up to see a middle-age man carrying a bow upon his back and dressed in thick leathers appeared before them. Now Claire knew that she shouldn’t judge, but she couldn’t help but think that this man was looking especially woebegone… as if he had more than a few sleepless nights lately.

But at the sight of him, Miounne beamed and said, “And good evening to you too, Bowlord! Your need must be pressing indeed for you to honor us with a visit. The good news is: your journey hasn’t been wasted. I’m pleased to report that we have a volunteer at last and one who comes highly recommended, at that.”

Claire turned to greet the man, who couldn’t have looked more relieved to hear that someone had finally stepped forward to lend a helping hand. He introduced himself as Bowlord Lewin, who was in charge of the Wood Wailers in Gridania, making him around the same rank of Commodore Reyner in Limsa.

Once all the introductions were done, he set about explaining everything that was going on.

“Now, time is of the essence, so I shall proceed directly to the heart of the matter,” he said, his tone becoming serious, “We wish for you to nip a potential thread to Gridania in the bud.”

That was with Mother Miounne spoke up, explaining, “Beneath the Central Shroud, there lies an underground burial site called the Tam-Tara Deepcroft. The place was one a Gelmorran settlement, but we Gridanians have long interred our dead there.”

A crypt? Oh, just her luck. Pirates were bad enough, but now she had to contend with dead people?

“Of late, however, shadowy figures have been seen skulking about the Deepcroft, and with ever increasing regularity,” Bowlord Lewin added grimly, “Based on the accounts of various witnesses, we suspect that these individuals belong to the Lambs of Dalamud, a doomsday cult which sprung up prior to the Calamity. These zealots have proven themselves dangerous in the past, and we leave them to their devices at our peril.”

Oh, even better. So she had to go down into a crypt, full of the dead, and who knows what else is down there… to find a cult who are probably obsessed with the end of the world? This day was just getting better and better.

She hid these thoughts however as she watched Bowlord Lewin sigh and inform her, “Ordinarily, I would have dispatched my best men to scour the Deepcroft with orders to flush the cultists out. Alas, the Calamity decimated our ranks, and the limited forces at my disposal are constantly required to keep the Ixal at bay.”

Ixal? She believed she may have heard of them when she passed through this place the first time she came through this city. A race of bird-men she believed them to be?

“They have probed every ilm of our defenses in search of a weakness, compelling me to spread our forces far more thinly than I would like,” Bowlord Lewin stated, “The situation being, we have no choice but to entrust the task of dealing with the Lambs of Dalamud to others. Can we rely on you...
to handle this matter, Claire?"

Well, she had come all this way and it would be rude if she left after they finished explaining everything. She nodded and he couldn’t have looked happier.

“You have my gratitude,” he said, sounding relieved. “Once you've seen to your preparations, pray make your way to the Deepcroft, and identify yourself to the guard posted at the entrance. He will apprise you of the latest developments. That is all.”

Miounne turned to Claire as she said, slightly worried, “Be careful out there, you hear? May the Crystal guide you and keep you!”

She merely gave them a friendly smile and a wave. They had explained that if she followed the road down to the right after leaving the Carline Canopy, it will lead her straight into the Central Shroud, where she would pass by a small training ground for hunters and Wood Wailers, who would be able to point the way for her towards Bentbranch Meadows—where there are stables where they raise some of the finest chocobos in the realm.

She set out from the city and properly stepped into the Shroud for the first time. The sky was slightly cloudy this day, and she was able to see such a beautiful wooded area around her. She could seem the flowers and trees long before she even stepped out this far, and soon found her way walking down a dirt trail towards the south.

She soon came to the river, following it to the encampment where she could see men and women in training—and were happy to point the way for her towards Bentbranch Meadows. Merely telling her to ‘follow the smell of Chocobo’ and she would find it in no problem.

So, after crossing the babbling creak, she found out what they meant for she could smell the musk of Chocobo almost right away. After attuning herself to the Aetheryte, with a note to come back after this job and explore more of the Twelveswood.

As she continued south, she soon found a path that widened up to a point that it led straight past ruins. She soon came across a small trail with a crumbling wall on either side of what looked like some sort of temple halfway buried. She entered a large, circular room that had several coffins set up and a few guards outside a large, stone door.

She approached, letting them know why she was here.

The guards then turned their attention to the door and began to explain what was going on here.

“No doubt the Bawlord has already informed you, but your task is to enter the Deepcroft and purge it of the Lambs of Dalamud,” he told her and she nodded, already aware of this though she wasn’t sure what to make of what these Lambs of Dalamud were all about. As if he guessed her thoughts, he went on speaking, “In case you're unfamiliar with them, the cult emerged shortly before the Calamity put an end to the Sixth Astral Era. The cultists took the lesser moon, Dalamud, for their god, believing that it would deliver them from the devastation. And so they were rather disappointed when Dalamud exploded into a thousand flaming pieces before it could complete its descent.”

Disappointed? Really? Shouldn’t they be grateful that they aren’t dead right now? Why would they want to ruin all that?

“Now, having seen their god turn to ash, one would think that the cultists might feel moved to question their faith,” the guard sighed, also sounding like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.
“On the contrary, it only served to stoke the flames of their fanaticism. The Lambs of Dalamud are convinced that 'heretics' -- that is to say, everyone but them -- interfered with the coming of their lord and savior, and that it's now their sacred duty to avenge him.”

Claire raised her eyebrows at him, and he actually let out a harsh laugh at the sight of it before his face grew solemn again.

“Whatever it is they're doing in the Deepcroft, you may be sure that no good will come of it. For the sake of Gridania, and Eorzea at large, put an end to their madness,” he begged and she nodded, promising that she would do what she could.

So, with a steadying breath, she waited for them to open the doors for her to slip through, telling her to knock three times when she returns.

She stepped inside and began to head down a long series of steps. Down… down… down… all the while it was growing darker with every step she took. And along with the dank and gloom, she could hear the steady dripping of water… which explained the thriving of plantlife she found down here. She could also see thick roots having stretched down far enough to reach this place and were slowly taking over the stone structure that were the only remains of people who once called this creepy place home.

Unlike the colorful beauty she came to admire in parts of Sastasha, the Deepcroft was filled with felt nothing more than an eerie gloom that chilled her to the core. She looked past the flickering torches as she crossed through the endless feeling of catacombs before she spotted it. She wandered down a narrow corridor until she passed by some torches and into an enormous cavern that was large enough to fight several buildings inside. They stood upon the edge of the cliff as she noticed a vast purple orb hanging above them, connected by bright blue streams of aether that acted as some sort of anchors all around it.

While in front of her on a narrow ledge… were the decaying remains of people… walking straight towards her?

Gods, she quickly realized that she hated zombies.

She didn’t have time think about it for the zombies charged at her and she was forced to deal with them. They were much tougher with than the bats and pirates from Sastasha, but they were no match for her for long. Once they were dead—again—she took the chance to look up and examine the glowing orb right above her head. It looked as if something was in there and it was feeding off those strands of energy. Well, she would have to deal with whatever was inside that thing. She figured that if those aether strands were somehow ‘feeding’ whatever was in there, then by cutting those connections, she should be able to put a stop to it.

She looked around to find a crumbling pathway along the side of the cliff and began to follow it.

She found flesh-eating swarms waiting for her as she had to stomp on them to crush their irritating biting before she reached another seemingly dead end before discovering a hole in the wall where some more insects were waiting for her. She didn’t know what she was expecting when she agreed to do this job, but she was glad to find that she hadn’t come across anything too dangerous at this point.

She continued on down the corridor, stumbling slightly on the uneven floor as the dripping of water continued. But it soon led to a few empty rooms with more insects and undead creatures waiting inside. It was hard to tell where she was going in this place, having to enter every room just to make sure she was going the right way. Once in a while, she did get lucky and found some
chests with loot inside. Usually some manner of potions that she stored away; but once in a while she found some gear that she could put on and feel a little more protected.

And at this point, she knew she needed all the help she could get right now.

At last, she found her way out of the tunnels and back out into the same cavern she was before, only on a lower level. At this point, it was hard to say if she was going the right way, at least until she spotted the altar set up on the ledge to such a point that it was just hanging over the edge. That was where she spotted a priest, dressed all in red, and seemed to be praying at the altar where one of the orbs of light hovered there—connected to the vast, purple sphere in the sky.

As soon as she took a step forward, the imps, that surrounded the priest, turned and began to attack her. As for the priest, as soon as he heard the commotion, quickly spun around. One look at his face revealed that he was not one of the undead, but she was left with no choice but to battle them all so that she could make sense of the situation. Unfortunately, the moment she took out the imps and priest… something was summoned in his place. Out of a smog of darkness sprang up another voidsent, and it hissed furiously as it turned to face her. It looked a great deal like the gargoyle she fought before, only this one was smaller and was dressed in black armor as its bat-like wings flapped about her head, swinging a heavy scythe at her.

Thankfully, this one was not as strong as the gargoyle had been and so she was easily able to kill it before she stepped before the altar. There wasn’t much to it… just a stone table with some candles set up upon it… with that strange glowing orb. Unsure of what she was to do, she reached out a cautious hand to touch it, hoping to get a clue… but as soon as it felt her touch, she somehow interrupted the spell and she watched as it faded away… taking the beam of light with it.

So that was the key…?

She looked up to the orb above her head once more before her eyes followed the other three strands of aether as she began to put it all together. From here, she could see that the other lights came from similar altars on lower levels and she knew that all she had to do was continue down the path and she was sure to reach them eventually. So, squaring her shoulders, she began to make her way along another path on the side of the ledge to continue downwards. On the way, she ended up coming across some giant spiders… not those tiny ones you can stomp on… these were massive and came up to almost her waist as their many legs swung about. She had to kick them away as they bit and stun her, forcing her to run straight into another group of zombies waiting for her.

Who would willing come to a place where the only company they had were pests and undead things?

Nevertheless, she continued deeper, heading down a more downward slope and turned around a corner to where she realized that these torches were recently lit. So there had to be more of those priests around here… though she still wasn’t able to pick up just what they were planning on doing with that purple sphere above their heads.

Rather than dwell on it, she stepped over the ruins of stones before walking right into a miteling nest… which was really starting to make the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. She really didn’t like this place.

Still, no point lamenting her choices. Too late to turn back now, she continued down the corridor until she came across another opening that led to the large cavern once more. And, once again, she found another priest at an altar that was being guarding by imps.

And like with the first one, she killed the imps before focusing on the priest; and when the voidsent
appeared, she was ready for it. Wiping off slime and blood from her boots, she glance up to touch the orb and allowed the stream of aether to flow back into the land and away from the sphere in the air. She was making progress, so that was one good thing.

She clung to the wall as some giant yarzons came creeping up and towered over her, their large mouths and fangs snapping at her.

“How is it you attack me but not the priests?” she asked in irritation as she stepped over the fallen bodies and slipped into another passageway.

She couldn’t help but wonder at this point just how deep this place went? It looked as if she was beginning to run out of walk space and that it would only be a matter of time before she came to an end. But the pit she saw before was pitch black… showing that it must lead even further downwards. She was almost afraid to ask. She soon came across a simple bridge of solid rock and it did little to cast her worries away about what might happen if she fell down there.

She had to be getting close though, she was coming across more undead men instead of insects, which she took as a sign that the guards were being increased.

She walked underneath a tangle of thick roots and plantlife before slipping and sliding down a slimy trail of stone. She passed by some thick boards at one point that looked as if they were the only things keeping the ceiling from caving in and she decided that it may be a good idea to get out of here as soon as possible. She didn’t like how they creaked as she walked past.

After climbing over some more thick roots and making her way past more yarzons, the slope evened out and she exited into the cavern once again. Looking up, she could just make out where the orbs were at this point. In fact, she could now make out where she was. Above her, though it was dark she could make out the entrance she used to get here. And when she looked across from her, she saw a large stone platform upon a pillar in the center of the great hole. The purple orb was dangling right over it and the final two beams of light were coming from two altars nearby.

She had to kill three more zombie guards before she spotted something strange. She read enough of her grimoire to recognize a magical seal when she saw one. She walked up to it and tried to touch it… only to realize that it was as good as a wall. She couldn’t get through or around this worrisome barrier when she saw the altar, imps, and another priest hard at work.

She frowned, glancing around her as she tried to think of a way to get through.

Just as she was thinking that she had reached a dead end, she spotted more of the twinkling fireflies glittering, almost as if they wanted her to follow them. She watched as they flew towards a small doorway she didn’t notice before. She walked up to it and tried to touch it… only to realize that it was as good as a wall. She couldn’t get through or around this worrisome barrier when she saw the altar, imps, and another priest hard at work.

She frowned, glancing around her as she tried to think of a way to get through.

It led to a dead end…

Filled with a few zombies walking around and a strange light upon one more altar. Surely it had to be something important if they left the undead here to guard it?

She killed the guards and approached the orb once more, staring at the light. Throwing caution to the wind, she reached up and place her hand inside the light… only for her hand to feel something small and beaded and she pulled it out to realize she was a small rosary of some kind.

After examining it, she began to wonder if this could be used as some sort of key to dispel the
barrier? Deciding she had nothing to lose, she turned on her heel and dashed back to the barrier and held her hand up to it—the rosary hanging from her fingers. Like she had hoped, the barrier faded as if it had never been there to begin with. Too bad that as soon as it was down, she was attacked on all sides by fiends.

She was growing annoyed at this point and dealt with them all until another voidsent arrived to be the last line of defense to keep her away from the altars. She ducked as it swung its scythe at her, its wings flapping angrily. Well, she killed it before she deactivated the last two orbs from the other altars.

Just as she was thinking it was all over, something new happened. The lights connected to the sphere above them faded away…

But the sphere didn’t fade.

Below her, a stone bridge began to rise up in sections until it formed a perfect bridge and the altar began to rumble. She wasn’t sure where the stone had come from, but that wasn’t important. The huge purple orb that the beams had been connected to lowered towards the dais, and as soon as it landed, she watched as something began to thrash about inside. That was when it broke open, dispelling the aether, and a creature appeared in its place. A large, slimy-looking voidsent appeared with a face full of tentacles and bright pink skin as if some sort of sea creature. It was also robed, clutching a short staff with a crystal on the end as it spun about, gargling furiously when it saw her.

“Who summons me from the void to reside within this crude vessel!?”, the creature demanded as she felt her jaw fall open.

Well, this was new.

But nothing was going to get done by standing there like a wallflower. She gave her head a hard shake as she ran forward, knowing that she couldn’t allow this creature to escape this crypt.

“You seem surprised,” it said, “Did you not cross our gates in search of blood? Come hither, daughter of the dawn. The undying master will drink deep tonight.”

She did not like what he meant by ‘master’. But she figured that she best find a way to kill this thing before someone else got hurt. She stood against the voidsent and she soon realized that the first part of the battle wasn’t hard. At least… until she saw it cast spells and summoned a handful of imps to his side. Now, the imps themselves weren’t strong, but she soon realized that they connected themselves to the voidsent by way of a sparking purple stream of aether. It didn’t take her long to realize that so long as the imp was alive and kept this connection alive, she could not deal a scratch upon the voidsent… or Galvanth the Dominator as he went known by.

So, after making sure to kill the imp and able to start making some strides in finishing this thing, it summoned up to its side skeleton soldiers, mitelings, and even more imps to its side.

She had to keep this up as the beast’s tentacles reached out to try and touch her. She backed off as she felt a paralyzing shock go through her body, making it difficult for her to move. Determined to keep going, she found her way through the wave of pain before she could recover and move once more. She then went back to focusing on the imps, knowing that they had to be the first to go. Once they were down, she was able to find an easier time deal with the skeletons and mitelings until it was just her vs Galvanth once more. But without his mobs, she was able to keep her full attention on this ugly brute before the final blow was dealt. She was panting hard as she watched it howl in pain and fly backwards, its whole body stiffening up. It dropped its staff as it fell to the ground and faded into a mass of black smoke, leaving not a trace of it behind.
She had won and she brushed her long hair out of her face before she spit out a mouthful of saliva, glad to see that it was over. After finding some new robes that she decided she could use, she turned around and headed straight back towards the entrance; not at all sorry to be rid of this disgusting place.

Tired and bruised, she managed to find her way back out so that she was in the fresh air and sunshine again. Oh, just the sweet smell alone was enough to cause to sigh with relief. Not wishing to waste it, she took her time in walking back through the Shroud and to Gridania, savoring every bit of the outside that she could.

And to think that people once lived underground in that place? She shivered at the thought.

Still, she found her way back through the gates of the city, returning to where she first started in the Carline Canopy where Mother Miounne was waiting for her.

At the sight of her coming in through the door—looking tired but pleased with herself—she waved cheerfully at her.

“Welcome back, Claire!” she cried as she approached the desk, “I'm reliably informed that your foray into the Deepcroft was a success.”

That was fast. She supposed stopping to speak with those two gate guards was the cause of it.

“Nor did I expect anything less,” Miounne added happily, “You've made such a habit of succeeding that it's difficult not to take your talents for granted. Rest assured, however: Mother is impressed, even if she isn't surprised. Bowlord Lewin asked me to pass on his thanks.”

Claire could only smile back, wondering if she had time to take a bath before she decided her next course of action. Mother Miounne shook her head, but there was a faint smile on her face as she said, “In any case, it's something of a relief to be able to call upon such a capable adventurer.”

But then some of her cheerfulness faded as she added, “Sadly, death has become an ever more common occurrence within our fraternity of late. Times being what they are, the guild is constantly inundated with petitions, and we are hard-pressed to find enough hands to deal with them all. While this means no shortage of work for able souls such as yourself, it also provides ample opportunity for the inexperienced to overreach themselves—with predictable consequences.”

That was when something caught her eye off to the side and glanced over there as she shook her head, rather piteously, muttering, “Ah...as if to illustrate the point...”

Claire followed Miounne’s gaze to see what she was talking about. Standing off to the side were a small group of adventurers—consisting of a tall Elezen archer, a small Lalafell mage, and a female conjurer about her own age.

She tilted her head slightly, wondering why they looked so familiar to her… that was when she realized that she did see them before! They were part of the same group of people she saw just outside Sastasha. Only now, there were just three of them… and they did not look happy about it.

“Avere's gone, and it's all your fault!” the tall Elezen archer snarled at the girl conjurer. “If it hadn't taken you an age to heal him, he would still be alive!”

The girl sniffled, wiping tears as she tried to explain, “B-But I tried! He bolted out of range before I could finish the spell!” She broke off, unable to finish as she began to sob out, “He shouldn't have been so hard-pressed in the first place... We should've done more to lighten his burden...”

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But she didn’t have a chance to even finish for the Lalafell mage interrupted her angrily as he spat out, “To the hells with this pathetic excuse for a party! I'm leaving, and it'd be too soon if I never see your faces again! Good-bye, and good riddance!”

He then went marching off without even a glance back at the heart-broken girl as the Elezen just shook her head. She held no more compassion to the crying girl—in fact, seeing her weep in such a way seemed to only ignite even more fury within her.

“I'm leaving as well! I doubt this comes as any surprise, but I never liked you,” she shouted, “I only suffered you for your healing, but you couldn't even do that one thing right! Cruel though this may sound, you brought this upon yourself.”

Claire only watched on, feeling her heart going out to the poor girl, who only cried even harder as the Elezen went on, not finished just yet.

“Oh, and by way of some parting advice...get rid of Avere's head!” she shouted, fury and disgust in her face. “Bury it, cremate it, do whatever the hells you like with it-- but for gods' sakes, stop carrying it around! It's...it's just... Just get rid of it, all right!?"

Unable to even stand being there a moment longer, she turned on her heel and left the conjurer alone, her face filled with misery and loss as she cried out desperately, “W-Wait! Don't leave me alone! Please! Oh...” but there was no point in pleading, for her two former travelling companions were now long out of her sight and she began to sob louder than ever, “I'm so sorry, Avere... Please forgive me...”

What do you say or do after witnessing something like that? Claire wanted to go over there and comfort the poor girl, yet she knew not how to do so. She then heard Miounne sigh grimly next to her, shaking her head at the sight.

“Scenes like this have become all too common. That makes a dozen times in half as many days...” she whispered mournfully before she looked back to Claire with a rather forced smile and explained, “Now you see why I'm grateful for adventurers of your experience. I can send women like you on a mission without worrying that you might not return--” She then gave a rather rough chuckle and added, “Well, not so much, at any rate.”

She paused, tapping her chin thoughtfully, before nodding to herself. “Speaking of missions, I would entrust you with another. About a bell ago, I received a message from my counterpart in Ul'dah. She seeks the services of a reliable adventurer, and you are nothing if not reliable. If you think you might be interested in this task, say the word, and I will be glad to share the details with you.”

Another job already? She hadn’t even got the smell of the undead out of her clothes yet. But then again, she supposed that an adventurer’s job was never done. Besides, she reasoned with herself that she had to be grateful that people like them were keeping her employed.

So, she nodded, deciding to at least hear out what she knew of this new ‘venture’.

Meanwhile, just outside the Carline Canopy, stood three guests watching the two speak with each other.

“So, that’s her, right?” asked a curious girl wearing a mask that covered most of her face. She then tried to poke her head around the corner to get a better look before questioning, “The one that everyone’s interested in?”
“Yda, please,” the Lalafell mage scolded lightly as Y’shtola pulled the girl back so that they weren’t seen. “There is no reason to be rude.”

“What?” Yda demanded, glancing back down at him, “I just want to see what she looks like. Especially if she’s joining the Scions.”

“Regardless, we don’t want her to think we’re spying on her,” he scolded with a roll of his eyes.

“But… aren’t we?” Yda asked in confusion. “You know… we’ve watched her from the moment she arrived and followed her all the way into the Shroud? I’m surprised that we didn’t follow her straight into the Deepcroft ourselves.”

“There was no need too,” Y’shtola said thoughtfully, “I felt the presence of malevolent presences fade shortly after we lost sight of her. Where once was a malicious aura that made my tail curl… it was gone. There is no doubt in my mind that she handled everything that one would consider to be a problem while she was in the crypt.”

“Well, that saves us the trouble,” Yda pointed out good-naturedly. “You know, adventurers really are something, aren’t they? I don’t know why we don’t have more join us?”

“Honestly, Yda,” the Lalafell sighed, “We’ve been over this. As Scions, it is our duty to remain as neutral as possible. We can’t been seen showing favoritism over one nation. And the problem is recruiting everyone who holds even the slightest bit of talent with a sword could end up bringing complications to our organization; especially if they hail from one of these nations.”

“That is the problem,” Y’shtola agreed quietly, bringing her hand up to her chin as she continued to think it all over. “Our duty is to think about of all of Eorzea. And many adventurers are out for fame and glory… yet this one…?”

“You, for one seem to have high expectations of this particular one?” the Lalafell questioned.

“Yes,” she said, “Whether or not she will be willing to cut all ties to the other nations is another question. However, it seems to me that it doesn’t matter which nation that one is from—at least to her. If someone needs aid, she seems to wish to help them regardless of who they are or where they are from.”

She lowered her hands and looked to the Lalafell next to her and stated, “I merely told Minfilia that she has a great deal of potential and that we could benefit from having someone like her helping us. I have not yet made up my mind on whether or not to ask her. Papalymo, what do you think so far?”

“Well, I have to agree in your assessments so far,” he confessed, “She took care of that problem with the Lambs of Dalamud quickly and efficiently. However…”

“Hey, why are you asking him and not me?” Yda demanded suddenly.

“Your opinion is always important, Yda,” Y’shtola reassured her. “I am merely asking a question.”

“Well, how about we just go out and ask her then?” Yda questioned as if it was the most obvious answer in the world. “You know? Tell her what we’re all about and then ask if she wants to join us? That would settle everything, wouldn’t it?”

“Honestly, Yda… do you ever think things through?” Papalymo sighed, “Sometimes I feel that I’m talking to a training dummy for all the good it seems to do. This is a big decision for anyone to make. While the fact that she shows much promise in battle, and as such has no ties to any of the
city-states, makes her an ideal recruit, we don’t know anything about her personality yet.”

He then looked back to Y’shtola and added, “That said, from what I have seen so far, I do agree with what you said in thinking she could be of great aid to us. When do you plan to approach her on the subject?”

“I could go there and talk to her?” Yda began.

“Would you listen to someone, you don’t even know, on joining an organization such as ours?” Y’shtola asked patiently. “No, it is best that I do it. She knows me, and will be more likely to listen. But, yes… I think that I will speak to her soon. As soon as I…?”

She then looked past the corner to see that the adventurer was heading down the stairs to where the airships were and she nodded at the sight.

“I’ll be right back,” she said after she made sure that the adventurer had left from their sights before approaching the desk to speak with Mother Miounne. She kept their discussion short as she asked her some quick questions. When she came back to the other two, she had a rather mischievous look in her eyes.

“It seems that I am now bound for Ul’dah,” she said at last.

“Ul’dah? Oh, you mean about the report that Thancred sent in about the possible giants in the mines?” Yda asked in surprise.

“Yes, it certainly looks that our new friend is heading there when she learned of the difficulties that are now plaguing the deserts. At least, she seems to be heading in that direction,” Y’shtola said. “After Mother Miounne explained that Momodi has been asking for able adventurers to aid in this investigation, she decided to go and look into it. Which would be a good opportunity for me to speak to Thancred on the matter as well. If she takes up the job to clear out those mines, as I am almost certain she will giving everything I have seen of her thus far…?”

“Wow, you have to have some serious backbone to want to go into some old, abandoned mines and face up against giants,” Yda couldn’t help but interrupt. “I like her. I’m all for having her join us.”

“I must say that I am not against the idea,” Papalymo agreed slightly more reluctantly. “But, as I said before, it is her decision. You will ask her after speaking with Thancred?”

“Yes, I think so,” Y’shtola nodded. “I know he would appreciate it if I were to ask for his opinion on this matter. It’s been a while since I last spoke with him, now that I think of it?”

“Well, he probably has his hands full with the growing unrest in Ul’dah,” Papalymo reminded her. “Tensions between the citizens there with the ever increasing number of refugees are starting to cause problems. Nothing too big yet, but it is a delicate matter. Not only that, he’s been taking on more jobs than usual these days. When next I see him, I’m going to have to ask that he slow down or he’ll burn himself out.”

“Oh, gods, you better tell him to behave himself too,” Yda pointed out, “We don’t want to scare her off because of Thancred.”

“True,” Y’shtola chuckled. “We know how fond he is of fair maidens. But I don’t think we need to concern ourselves overmuch. He knows the time and place for such things. Well, it sounds like it is all decided. I’ll head over to Ul’dah myself and observe her for a little longer. I’ll have my full decision soon enough, however.”
(Alright! The first chapter for the New Year! I hope that 2018 was a good year for all of you and that this new one will be even better! I decided on a shorter chapter this week. Oh, but it sure takes me back to when I first started this game and had no idea what I was doing. Such fond memories. Well, I plan to finish one more chapter before 4.5 comes out, so I hope you look forward to it.)
Into a Copper Hell

Chapter Summary

So, now that she cleared out the crypt of the undead it was time to clear out the mines with giants. Of course, that leads to a whole new series of quests for after all that she's done she has earn the interest of the Scions of the Seventh Dawn!

Claire was starting to wonder when she would next be allowed a break.

No sooner did she come out of her battle with the undead did she find herself flying off for her next job. As she left the Carline Canopy, Miounne told her of the problem that Ul’dah was facing at the moment.

“As I mentioned earlier,” she explained to her, “The request comes to us from the Adventurers' Guild in Ul’dah. Once you arrive, seek out Momodi, the proprietress of the Quicksand. Think of her as the sultanate's version of myself. Chances are she'll send you into the midst of danger, but I have every confidence that you will pull through unscathed.” And it was with a sunny smile did she give her a little push and finished, “Now, off you go, Claire, and good luck!”

And that was all she knew about this assignment.

And it was also how she found herself back within the city of Ul’dah just as it was starting to get dark. She was glad of it though, because she thought the city was so beautiful at night and couldn’t help but pause to admire all the buildings around her as she was directed towards the Quicksand.

She found it upon the Ruby Road Exchange and when she entered, she saw that inside the tavern of stone was already full of people drinking and talking with each other. She looked about for a time before she spotted a Lalafell woman with bright red hair tied up with a decorated hairpiece behind the bar area. And when she spotted her looking over a familiar book full of names, she put two and two together and knew that this had to be Mistress Momodi.

“Welcome to the Quicksand, friend,” Momodi said cheerily, not looking up right away as she looked over the book, when Claire arrived, “I'm a tad busy right now, if you wouldn't mind showin' yourself to--” Her voice died on her when she looked up and got a good look at her. That was when she had a rather knowing smirk and asked, “Judgin' by your determined expression, I take it you ain't here for ale. Are you called Claire Faye, by any chance?”

A little surprised that she knew her name, she could only nod and Momodi could not have looked more delighted.

“Ah, lovely!” she proclaimed, “Miounne sent word that you'd be reportin' for duty. She also made a point of callin' you the adventurer of the moment. That ain't no small praise, comin' from her. But you didn't come all the way here to listen to my prattle, did you? Doubtless you're eager to get started, so let's talk business, shall we?”

Claire nodded as Momodi began to look around as if expecting another to join them as she muttered, “The petitioner ought to be arrivin' any moment now...”

No sooner did she speak did a new voice chimed in from the doors, “Gods almighty! Another
second under that sun, and I would have been set afire! A tankard of ale, if you would be so kind!"

Claire looked as Momodi gave a chuckle when an elderly Lalafell, with snowy-white hair and mustache as well a pair of spectacles perched on his nose, marched over to them.

"Exellent timin', Papashan!" Momodi said happily, “It just so happens the adventurer who'll be handlin' your petition is here.”

At that, Papashan glanced up to look her in the eye before giving a tiny wink that took Claire a little bit aback, but she felt the smile twitch at her mouth.

“So this winsome lass is the much-lauded adventurer, is she? Marvelous, marvelous!” he cried out graciously and bowed low to her. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance, milady. I am Papashan, formerly of the Sultansworn. I thank you for agreeing to lend us your aid.”

“Mayhap you'd like to apprise Claire of her mission?” Momodi offered, cutting him off in the middle of his praise.

“Yes, of course,” he said before clearing his throat, “The petition in question was submitted by an acquaintance of mine at Amajina & Sons Mineral Concern. It relates to an unfortunate development at Copperbell Mines. To be plain, giants have seized control of the place.”

“Giants?” Claire repeated, for a moment, sure that she heard him wrong. How in the world could there be giants in a mine?

He noticed her skeptical look and nodded, confirming what she heard was right.

“Yes,” he repeated, “These giants are of the clan known as the hecatonchires--fearsome creatures who were sealed within the deepest depths of the mines during the bygone Thorne Dynasty. Alas, it seems they have managed to break through the layer of rock which served to imprison them, and now prowl the tunnels where the miners ply their trade.”

Ah, she saw what was going on a malm away. They were once slaves to Ul’dah’s ancestors and were later sealed away deep into the mines before they were forgotten about. And now they were looking for a chance to escape.

“The creatures are justifiably angry about their treatment at the hands of our ancestors, and their presence has forced the suspension of all mining activities on the site,” Papashan finished.

Momodi frowned at this news and specified, “It's no wonder they're angry. Didn't the Thorne Dynasty come to an end over three hundred years ago?”

Three hundred years? That is a long time to leave them alone with their grudges. She could only imagine how angry they must be right now.

“You know your history well, milady,” Papashan nodded, looking up at Momodi. “The people of that age used the hecatonchires to work their mines. By way of enchanted helms, they were able to bind the ferocious creatures to their will. But as is off the way in such tales, these enchantments eventually failed, and the slaves rose up against their masters. In a desperate bid to contain the unbridled fury of the hecatonchires, our ancestors induced the collapse of the mines' lowermost levels. So it was that the Great Giant Revolt was ended--buried beneath a hundred thousand tons of rock.”

Momodi's brow furrowed at this new information before declaring, “Well, now...that's got me thinkin'... I seem to recall there bein' an article about Copperbell in the Mythril Eye a fortnight or so
ago. It said the mines were bein' reopened as to meet the risin' demand for buildin' materials. Like as not, our boys dug a bit too deep and freed the giants.”

Right, Claire had seen that all over. Even after five years, the damage that the Calamity inflicted upon the world was still clearly seen by all. She supposed that they would be growing desperate enough to open an old, abandoned mine... especially since they would have forgotten that there were giants, of all things, locked away in there.

“Gods...to think the poor creatures are still alive an' kickin' after three centuries...” Momodi continued on in a resentful way, “That's a long time to nurse a grudge. They must be seethin'...”

“Indeed,” Papashan agreed, “And that makes them a danger to us all. There will be no mining at Copperbell so long as they remain. For the sake of both peace and prosperity, they must be subdued. This is the task which we would have you undertake. I'll not deny that the mission will be rife with danger, but our need is great. And so I beg you, put an end to this sorry business.”

Claire had mixed feelings about this job. She could not help but feel sorry for the giants even after knowing the danger that they posed to them. Still, she had to reason with herself that the people of Ul’dah did not deserve to be attacked over something that took place so long ago. Sad as she was to admit it, perhaps there was no other choice in the matter and so she nodded.

“Gods bless you!” Papashan sighed in relief and bowed low again. “I feared you might have reservations, but I assure you it is for the best.”

“In case you don't know, Copperbell Mines are in western Thanalan,” Momodi added, “Do take care, you hear?”

“Ah, and one last thing before you depart...” Papashan added, getting Claire’s attention again, “An employee of Amajina & Sons is presently at the Quicksand. The fellow's name is Painted Mesa, and he knows Copperbell Mines well. It may behoove you to seek his counsel.”

She promised that she would as she was directed towards a powerfully built Roegadyn miner leaning up against a pillar a short distance away from them.

“Lookin’ for Painted Mesa?” he asked when she questioned him, “Well you found him.”

He looked over her for a moment before adding, “So you're the adventurer who's volunteered to deal with the mess down in Copperbell, are you?”

She nodded again, this time throwing in a playful wink and he actually laughed at that.

“You've got guts, miss. I just hope you've got skills to go with 'em, 'cause things ain't pretty down there,” he said agreeably before his cheer faded to one of deadly seriousness. “The hecatonchires've left the place in a right state, and nary a week after minin' resumed.” He paused there for a moment before adding, “I don't know if you know this, but Copperbell was old when the Ul Dynasty was still young, and it was abandoned centuries ago. If it hadn't been for the shortage of minerals needed for the rebuildin' effort, the Concern would never have thought to reopen it. We knew full well about the giants beforehand, but the project went ahead anyway.”

Claire arched an eyebrow. They actually knew that there were giants down there? Then why in the Seven Hells would they reopen it if they knew that?!

“I mean nothin' could possibly survive bein' buried under a mountain's worth of rock for three centuries, right?” Painted Mesa added when he saw the look on her face. “Wrong! Our miners dug up more than they bargained for. One swing of the pickaxe too many, and they found 'emselves in
the company of giants. Unless we can subdue 'em, the nation's glorious recovery'll grind to a halt for want of aught to build with.”

Was that all they were concerned with?

Still, she knew that this had to be done and nodded as he actually gave her a shaky smile and pointed to the exit of the Quicksand, informing her, “The Stone Torches're keepin' watch over the entrance in case the giants fancy some sunlight and fresh air. One of 'em will be able to show you the way in. The hope of the nation's restin' on you, friend. Best of luck!”

She nodded before hurrying off. As she made for the exit, looking around for the right gate, she was unaware that she was being watched.

*Y’shtola*

“I have to admit, I am impressed,” said Y’shtola’s companion; a dashing young man with snow white hair and was playing with a small dagger in his hands. “Not to mention, a little smitten.”

“What have I told you about courting within the organization?” Y’shtola asked him calmly. As soon as she had left Gridania, she messaged for Thancred to meet her as soon as possible. Now here they were, standing in an alleyway among the streets of the Ruby Road Exchange, watching as the adventurer left the Quicksand and headed straight towards one of the gates of Thal.

“I know, I know,” he said with an easy grin, “But she’s not one of us just yet, is she? If she doesn’t have a special someone then that means…?”

“And what would you do if she does join? That would make working with you rather awkward,” Y’shtola pointed out.

“You’re right,” he said thoughtfully, “She might fall in love with me?”

“No, I’m more worried of her wanting to smack you every day,” Y’shtola countered with a shrewd grin. “I would hate to put myself up as your personal healer.”

Thancred let out a good-natured laugh before saying, “You wound me, my fair maiden. I fear that my minstrel’s blood is to blame for my charm. I cannot help that words of romance flow from my mouth like wine.”

Y’shtola rolled her eyes as she turned her gaze back to the adventurer, who was just making her way through the gates and out into the deserts for the first time.

“So, she is to be the one to deal with those trouble-making giants in the mines?” Thancred asked, his smile also fading slightly as they were brought back to deal with the manner at hand. “I have to say that the idea of giants possibly breaking out and wreaking havoc up top does little to soothe my worries.”

“Mayhaps,” Y’shtola said, slowly leaving the alley and beginning to follow after the adventurer. “So let us see where hence this path my lead us.”

*Claire*

She began her first journey across the rocky desert, just about to leave her in complete darkness. It was calm though, quiet, for the most part. The temperature had indeed gone down a great deal as she stepped across the sands and passing by prickly plantlife as she continued her march across Western Thanalan.
She was told to continue on north from here until she cross a bridge over a chasm. When she reached a fork in the road, all she had to do was take the right path and it would lead her to the entrance to the mines.

The journey wasn’t as long as it had been when she crossed through the Shroud, but she found that she quite liked the peaceful stroll. Aside from the random monster attacking her, she found that she could handle it very easily at this point.

She soon spotted the bridge and knew she must be getting close.

After stopping to ask the Stone Torches guards, they pointed a little bit ahead of them, reminding her to go right, for the left path would take her to the small town of Horizon instead. Entertaining thoughts of visiting Horizon later on, she wandered a little further until she came narrow path that led to a reserve that was full of mining equipment and boards. There were also a variety of bombs drifting about her that shown up brightly in the darkness as she made sure to give them a wide berth before stopping in front of an armored guard at the entrance.

“There's been an incident inside Copperbell Mines,” he warned her before she even had a chance to explain why she was here. “We are here to ensure that its effects are contained, but for your own safety, I suggest you stay well away from here.”

She merely smiled as she explained that she was the adventurer who was here to help take care of their giant problem.

The man blinked and looked as if he couldn’t believe what he just heard.

“What?” he repeated, “You're the adventurer who's volunteered to quell the hecatonchires?” His brow furrowed. “I didn't think that Papashan would be able to find someone so quickly...if at all.”

He sighed. “The giants are content to wreak havoc inside the mines for now, but it's only a matter of time before they think to come outside. The sooner you see to them, the better. Make ready as best you can, and enter at will.”

Claire nodded as she watched the man open the door for her. She looked into the hole, realizing that it looked even darker than the night sky above her and felt a little sense of unease. Still, she took a deep breath and entered, her weapon at hand.

She compared this place to the last two dungeons that she went exploring in and she couldn’t help but be struck by how different they all were. Whereas Sastasha reminded her of an underwater world with more ale-loving pirates than she would have liked, and she wish she could forget the creepy dead of the Deepcroft… the first thing she noticed about this place was the rich, thick stone. The area she was in was full of broken planks, lit lanterns, and abandoned mining equipment.

She followed the lone tunnel which led her to a series of mining shafts that were full of pulley systems, as well as creatures lurking about without much of a care. She was soon attacked by the coblyn, creatures that had spindly tentacle legs, bulging eyes, and a massive series of crystalized stone upon their backs—and dark, furry spriggans that were carrying around jewel-like stones.

And that was just the first room.

As soon as she brought down the last coblyn though, she saw something small glint as it fell from its body. Looking over it, she realized that it was a metal key… most likely it was to be the coblyn’s meal for later for she remember hearing that these things liked to eat minerals and ores. It
probably thought that it was some rare treat.

As soon as she picked it up, she spotted the locked metal door and it didn’t take long for her to put it all together.

She was not surprised to find the key opened the door with no problems—what did surprise her was that instead of seeing a long corridor of stone, she found another room with a large wooden lift waiting for her. Knowing that she would have to go deeper into the mine, she moved inwards and stepped up closer to the lift.

It seemed sturdy enough as she slowly tested her weight on it—as if it already had repairs by the time that the giants came after the miners. She allowed the lift to carry her down what felt like a long ways, but it stopped quickly enough with a gentle bump at the bottom. When she walked off, she could see light torches directly in front of her. As she followed them, she saw a large chasm, not as large as the one in the Deepcroft, but one still large and deep enough to know that if she fell in, it would be a long time before she reached the bottom.

It was roped off for the miner’s safety however and was happy to stick to it as several more spriggans jumped over to greet her sudden arrival. She continued going up and down the curved pathway, where she could see that miners have painstakingly carved out a way for them. She passed by more abandoned equipment and materials that were left behind in a hurry. It was easy enough for her to know where she needed to go. For the dead ends that she passed were easy enough for her to cast a quick glance around and continue on. There were several wooden bridges that connected her to other pathways, having to pass by the large, metal machines as she continued on. At one point, one of the giants came bursting through the walls at her. She ducked and jumped back as it waved a metal hammer that was even larger than she was. She didn’t even think as she attacked it, watching it fall with surprising ease.

She breathed hard, feeling guilty as she continued even deeper. Despite knowing that this was her job, she could not help but feel that she was doing the wrong thing here.

She managed to forget that for the most part when more spriggans and sprites attacked her on the other side of some scaffolding. After going up and down the bridges, she soon found a long piece of wooden bridges that curved and hugged the side of the wall and led to more shafts. After another round of killing vermin, she came upon the other side of the chasm. She then continued on until she found some broken tracks set up for mine carts which led to a complete dead end. It looked like this part of the mines caved in a long time ago… or perhaps even by the miners in a desperate attempt to escape.

She frowned, looking all around her, thinking that this was as far as she could go. Still, with the giant she ran into before, she knew that there had to be another way in though? She began casting her gaze around for anything that could help her. Even if she could dig through this rock on her own, she didn’t see any tools to help. At least until an old blasting device had gotten her eye.

Ah, she was starting to get it. This place must have been where the giants were sealed off after the miners realized that that they weren’t alone down here. They must have been in a hurry to escape because they didn’t even bother to take their equipment with them. Which means…?

She spotted a small bag of firesand set out to the side and grabbed hold of it to set it up at the foot of the blockade. But even as she was setting it down, she realized that this little bit of sand was nowhere near enough to blow it away. She backtracked a ways, searching all around her and got lucky when she found more firesand sitting upon a nearby lift.

After putting the firesand together at the blockade, she went back to the blasting device and made
sure that it set off. With a loud BANG that caused her ears to ache, the blast was just powerful enough to clear the shaft for her to continue on. That was the good news. The bad news was that she had more guests waiting for her when she did. Not giants, instead she was faced with spriggans and floating bombs like the ones she had seen outside. She could feel tears in her clothes from that fight from the spriggan’s teeth, and burn holes from the bombs as she wiped some of the dirt out of her eyes. They were weak and easy to kill of course… at least until the real hecatonchire came barreling in after she killed them all.

After searching the room for a moment when the giant was dead, she found a small key on the ground that let her unlock another door at the end of the shaft, which led to a sort of cage-like walkway that was right above another chasm. She was really glad that the fighting on top didn’t cause it to break—even as these ghostly blob-like creatures started attacking her.

She found another shaft lift, built as strong as the first and knew that it was her only way down at this point. She didn’t even think as she stepped in and pulled the lever, which took her down even deeper into the mines.

After following more of the mine cart tracks, she found another blocked passageway with another blasting device already set up for her. Knowing what she had to do, she began to check in each of the little enclaves she could find, looking for more firesand. After killing more of the monsters that lurked about, she gathered herself just enough that she could get that blasting charge going. She was prepared this time when she set it off, covering her ears as the sound shook the entire mines to their core.

She stepped in, climbing over the remains of stone and figured that she had to be closer to where the giants were. She wasn’t sure how deep she was at this point, but she knew that she had to be getting deep enough to have reached the end. She continued her way, making sure to pick up all the firesand she could on her way in before she found another large room-like area. It was filled with broken mine carts and machines that were built as some kind of diggers or pulleys… and what looked like a giant blob of green slime?

She tried to fight it anyway even as she could barely make a scratch on its blobby body. When she saw the blasting cap and device set up nearby though, she had an idea that this thing may take more damage to fire. So she brought out another blasting cap and watched it explode; making sure to step far enough away so that it didn’t hurt her.

She watched as the blob was hit with the fire… only to watch on with horror as it split into two smaller balls of slime. She was just thinking she only made things worse when she realized that they were both slightly weaker than when it was still just one entire blob. So, she decided to try it again, summoning up another blasting cap… and watched as the fireball caused the two slimes shrink and multiple into four. They were growing smaller and weaker with every hit and she knew that if she kept it up long enough, they would be small enough to easily kill.

Even as the spriggan appeared and were attacking the blasting cap, she continued this until she had eight of them and now were so small that it was almost laughably easy to kill them.

She felt her blood pumping when she used a little more firesand to blow apart a hole in the wall and hurried down even deeper so that she was stepping into a sparkling cave of minerals twinkling a little bit at her while a shallow spring could be heard right below her. She couldn’t tell if the miners had ever been this far down for she was unable to find any sort of mining equipment at this point—not even lanterns. But they didn’t need to be, for the crystalline walls were giving off a faint light, glowing a deep blue color just bright enough for her to see by. Including showing off the hippocerfs and uragnites that were waiting for her. She had to smash her way through them before
crawling herself out of some underground spring that led to an incline where another hecatonchire came straight for her after he broke through the wall. Giving how easy it was for them to break through rock in this place it was a wonder why they weren’t able to escape much earlier.

Still, she moved on as her feet soon lead down a thin, narrow passage that led to a large, crystalline cavern full of more of the blue and purple light that sparkling off the walls in a transcendence series of colors. She could stare at this beautiful stone for hours and never grow sick of it as she stepped even further inside. It seemed that she had reached the end of the passage for she could not see anything else down here.

At least until…?

“SLAVES NO MORE! FREE! FREEEEEE!”

She stared around at the noise as she heard a mighty slam against the crystal wall that shook the entire cavern.

The largest Hecatonchire yet came breaking through the wall, bellowing out so that his voice echoed around them—bouncing off the walls and making it feel as if ten of those giants were here. She watched as an enormous hammer that looked like it was trimmed with gold came breaking through the wall, followed by another ugly head. Its enormous body covered with red markings, dripping in chains and leather, with a massive horned helm sat upon its head while a pair beady eyes, that had turned white from being trapped in the dark for so long, glared down at her.

It continued roaring, shrieking death to his former masters and she felt pity in her very soul at the sight. She moved around, knowing that if she wanted to live she had to avoid that hammer which was about thirty times her size. But it was easier than she thought it would be to move about it, because even though he was huge, he was also very slow. He was barely able to throw out its hammer at her as she was already moving behind him whenever he brought it down with a crash.

Roaring in anger, he went to the wall instead, trying to break through it so that more of his brothers could escape. Seeing this, she ran up to continue to deal out the damage needed. It was with one piteous look did she make sure that the creature fell… leaving her to deal with the smaller giants that had managed to break through.

“Forgive me,” she whispered sadly as she watched the giants fall… leaving her alone in this empty place. She put her book back to her side before doing one last check of the cavern… satisfied that there wasn’t anyone else here. If there were, then there was a chance that they were still deep down below them… unable to get out.

She wasn’t sure if the problems were solved completely… but she was reasonably confident that the giants weren’t going to escape anytime soon.

So, she turned back and made her way back up to the surface.

By the time that she returned, she was started to see that the sun was already beginning to come up. She must have spent all night down in those mines… and she couldn’t help but smirk when she saw the stunned expression on the Stone Torch’s face when he saw her. She merely gave him a friendly wave as she left, heading back to Ul’dah, breathing in the fresh air once more and glad to leave that tomb-like mine far behind her.

*Later*

She stretched out as she entered the Quicksand, longing for a bath more than ever before. With that
lovely thought in mind, she went over to where Painted Mesa was still standing to inform him what happened. But as soon as he saw her, he gave her a big grin and waved her over.

“Ah, the conqueror of Copperbell returns!” he laughed, clapping her on the shoulder as she stepped up, “Thanks to you, our minin’ operations can resume, and Ul’dah will have the materials she needs to rebuild. The entire nation’s in your debt, friend.”

She only smiled back with a nod and he laughed even louder as he proclaimed, “I’ll share the good tidin’s with Papashan next time I see him. As for you, you’ll want to report to Momodi. It’ll do the woman well to see you alive and in one piece.”

This sounded like a plan and she agreed at once—half wondering if she could bother Momodi for a place where she could get cleaned up. She still had bits of seaweed clinging to her boots and the smell of decay in her hair so the fact that she was covered in dirt did little to make her feel better. But before she could head over to speak with the proprietress, she heard a terrified scream coming from outside.

At the sound, all the conversation inside the Quicksand fell silent as everyone stared at the door. Without pausing to think, Claire ran outside—actually believing for a moment that a giant escaped the mines and followed her here.

She ran out to be greeted by the morning sky and a crowd of people gathering below in front of a fountain. That was where she saw a woman in a dirty, shabby cloak lying crumpled on the ground; desperately trying to scramble to her feet.

Claire then looked to see the cause of her distress in the form of man dressed in fine clothes and had the air of a merchant—with a rather disgusting smirk on his face that annoyed her. He also was surrounded by several armed and greasy-looking men that looked to be like bodyguards. She didn’t even have to ask what was going on to see what was happening.

“Shut your mouth, you thieving little swine!” the merchant shouted in a know-it-all and obnoxious way. “You stole from me--don’t even think to deny it!”

“P-Please, sir,” the woman begged imploringly, still trying to scramble back. “I didn't steal nothin’! I b-bought this--paid for it with me own coin!”

Soon enough, her cries got the attention of an entire crowd and Claire descended the stairs so that she was standing off to the side as she witnessed the scene.

The merchant only laughed nastily at how scared she was and continued shouting out, “What rot! You refugees are all the same--couldn't afford maggoty mole meat, much less a choice cut of dodo! I'm going to say it one more time: give back what you stole, or I'll make you wish you'd never set foot in this town!”

Wait, was that was it? He was harassing this woman over some meat? Did he have to cause a scene? But as she looked to his face, she felt a hint of anger as the man leered down at her. Almost like a predator would do before about to pounce on a helpless rabbit.

“By rights, I should turn you over to the Brass Blades, you know--help keep the streets safe for the law-abiding citizens,” he threatened. “But I'm a reasonable man. If you agree to serve me in... whatever capacity I require, the authorities needn't hear of your crime.”

The men he was surrounded by all began to hoot with laughter and threatened to come closer. The woman grew more desperate and tried to push herself away from them, however she seemed too
scared to even get up.

“B-But I ain't done nothin' wrong!” she cried out, staring around wildly at the crowd around her for someone to help. “Twelve as me witness!”

Sadly, Claire saw that most of the crowd drew away, not wanting to get involved, and ignored her pleas. Claire remained where she was as the woman’s desperate eyes found hers. Realizing that she was the only one who didn’t move away, she reached out a shaking hand, continuing to plead with tears forming in her eyes, “P-Please, adventurer! Help me, I beg o’ ye! I swear on me mother's grave, I didn't steal nothin'! I bought this with the coin I'd saved...” she started to cry more openly as she finished, “I only wanted to treat me children to a decent meal...”

Claire hesitated for only a moment before the men were now moving in close enough to grab her. When it became clear that no one else was going to help, she decided that they had gotten close enough—so she broke free of the crowd and stood between the two sides. She could hear people around her gasping in surprise and awe at her actions and even a strangled cry of relief from behind her.

She ignored everyone else though, focusing instead on her fight.

The merchant, however, just laughed at the sight of her there.

“And who the hells are you when you're at home!?” he mocked, “This dog's master?!”

She glared back, not letting his words get to her. Instead, she warned them all, her eyes narrowing as she reached for her grimoire, “I’m only going to say this once. Leave her alone.”

The merchant and his men just snorted with laughter and she took this as permission to crush them all. If only to see those smug looks wiped off their faces.

“I've had enough of this mummer's farce,” the merchant called before saying rather lazily, “You lot, teach them a lesson!”

Wordlessly, the terrified woman finally managed to get up and staggered away as the men surrounded her, continuing to laugh and even belch so that she could smell the ale they drank. Claire moved around them so fast and light on her feet that she may have as well been a dancer with how clumsy and slow these guys were. She could hear the cheer and applause of the crowd around her as they watched on—though she tuned them out so that they were merely a dull buzz in her ear.

She was up against four of them all together and she dealt with the three weaker ones before she turned her attention to the largest and greasiest looking one. He was difficult to deal with in the way that he was still drunk so it seemed to take his brain a while to realize that he was getting hit. Thankfully, his body wasn’t able to keep up with this and by the time he noticed this, he had taken enough of a hit that he was knocked to the ground without even realizing what happened.

She couldn’t deny that it was with a great deal of satisfaction seeing the terrified look on the bodyguard’s faces as they looked up at her—realizing that they were out of their league.

“I ain't gettin' paid enough for this!” she heard one of them yelled as he and the other two still conscious thugs turned tail and rain for the nearest gate.

“H-Hey! Where the hells do you think you're going!?” the merchant bellowed after them, fear in his voice this time.
'Not so tough without someone here to fight for him,' she thought to herself as she put her grimoire back to her hip, realizing that she didn’t even need to summon her carbuncle out this time. The woman stumbled to her feet and made her way over to her with a great big smile across her face.

“Thank ye, kind adventurer!” she told her with her voice full of gratitude, “Thank ye thrice over!”

Claire smiled back before she felt a familiar ringing buzz enter her head.

No… not again…

She staggered, her hand going up to her head as she felt dizzy and sick once more. Time seemed to freeze around her, her head feeling like it was about to split open. She tried to fight it, but she felt herself being carried away as if travelling along a river. Even as she shut her eyes, seeing that confused and worried expression over the woman’s face as everything faded away.

*Vision*

Where was she now?

She had been in Ul’dash just a moment ago, had she not? Wait… she recognized this place. She was still in Ul’dah only now she was standing outside the gates. She watched as the sight of two Ul’dans walking along the path that led up to the city. As they did though, something caught their eyes and she followed their gaze to see the small hobble of tattered and worn tents set up just outside the walls.

A refugee camp by the look of it.

“I’d swear there were more refugees than when last I looked...” one of the young men said, though he wasn’t speaking to her. Rather he was looking to his slightly older companion, who nodded back with a frown.

“And you wouldn't be mistaken,” he said to him, taking his friend by surprise.

The first man then went on to question, “But it's been five years since the Calamity! Why are they only coming here now?”

That was a good point. Claire wasn’t sure why there would be so many only coming here even though it’s already been years since the Calamity.

“It’s simple, really—” the older gentleman stated, “While a number of hamlets survived the immediate aftermath of the Calamity, many were no longer able to support their communities. The residents found their lands had either been rendered barren, or cut off from trade routes--and problems like those aren't easily solved. Though they tried to make the best of it, it was only a matter of time before they were forced to abandon their homes and seek a new life in the city.”

Claire listened sadly as the younger man sighed, looking over the camp once more as the people seemed to have a permanent air of melancholy over them like dark clouds.

“I see...” he muttered. “But the Calamity affected the whole realm, didn't it? Is the same thing happening in other cities?”

The older man nodded and explained, “If the talk is true, yes. Though perhaps our situation is more pronounced. Ul’dash has a reputation for being prosperous, so it’s natural that the refugees would try their luck here first.”
At those words, the younger man frowned a little more before he crossed his arms.

“My heart goes out to them, it truly does…but I would be lying if I said that I wasn’t apprehensive,” he confessed a little more quietly, as if worried of being overheard. “I hope their presence doesn’t foment lawlessness in the city.”

“Well, if things do take a turn for the worse,” his friend replied calmly, “we always have the Immortal Flames. I daresay the Brass Blades would welcome their help.”

No sooner did he say that did the other look as if he was offended at that statement.

“The heroes who fought the Garlean Empire, patrolling the streets for riffraff?” he demanded with a touch of indignant anger in there.

“It may well come to that,” his companion nodded solemnly, not at all surprised by his action. “Impoverished and desperate as they are, you may be sure that some of the refugees will turn to crime.”

And then what would happen? How many more will be hurt in the process? She wasn’t sure what to think.

The man then sighed once more, deeper than ever as he finished, “You know what this place is like. If you’ve no coin, you’ve no hope.”

Funny… that seems to be how it is wherever you go. No, not funny… that wasn’t the right word. It was sad.

“What will become of our city?” the younger man asked him with concern.

“Not all refugees are bad, mind you,” his friend reminded him, glancing back to the camp. “Some are able to find employment and lead honest lives.”

That was when Claire saw her. It was that same woman, dressed in a dirty white cloak, speaking with a merchant. Claire watched as she pulled out a few coins and exchanged them for a small package, looking very pleased with herself as she turned away, tucking her purchase safely away inside her pocket as the seller thanked her for her business and began to call out that he had the cheapest dodo meat around.

“Looking around, you’d think that Ul’dah was well on its way to recovery,” the young man said, causing Claire to look back to them. “But peer through the veil of prosperity and you’ll see no end to the misery and suffering.”

With that, the two men resumed their journey, continuing inside the city gates. And then the vision faded out again...

*End of Vision*

She didn’t understand. Why did this keep happening to her? Why was she struck with such pain and these memories that were not her own?

“Er...madam? Are ye alright?” said a worried voice and Claire’s eyes snapped open. She felt dizzy and light-headed, but she suddenly came back to reality and remembered where she was.

She looked to the woman and smiled as she said to her, “Yes, I’m fine, thank you. Just… a little dizzy.”
The woman nodded in understanding before Claire turned her gaze back to the merchant, who was holding up his hands defensively, as if expecting her to come after him this time.

The woman nodded, and the two looked up at the slimy merchant, who held up his hands in defense. “Wh-What now!?” he demanded, “You mean to threaten a defenseless citizen!?”

“There’s no need,” she retorted coldly, her usual quiet voice being carried over the silent crowd, “I will vouch for her. I saw her buy that meat! You have no right to bother her any longer!”

It wasn’t a total lie, of course. But she didn’t feel like she needed to go into too much detail. After all, what would one say if she declared that she saw it in a vision of all things?

Completely taken aback, now stuttering, the merchant cried out, “…What? Saw her buy it, you say? Th-That’s absurd!”

She was about ready to demand that they return to where the woman bought the dodo meat to begin with and speak with the seller when she heard another voice from somewhere in the crowd cried out, “Aye, ’tis true! Leave the poor woman alone, you damnable vulture!”

She felt her mouth twitch slightly, finding that hard to believe, but at least someone else was willing to stand up for this poor woman who had done nothing wrong.

“Wh-Who said that!?” the merchant demanded as he spun around, now looking frustrated and angry all at once. But when he realized that he was on his own, and the rest of the crowd was shooting him nasty looks, he spun back to the woman—who was shaking with silent fear behind Claire—and snarled out, “I will overlook this...but just this once!”

The crowd began to jeer at the man as heran past them and were already talking excitedly among themselves about the fight they just witnessed.

Well, that takes care of that. Claire turned back to the woman with a warm smile.

“There,” she said gently, “You’re safe now.”

The woman returned her smile with one that was twice as bright as she bowed gratefully and said, “Gods bless ye, adventurer! If ye hadn't come along when ye did, who knows what that monster might've done! “It don't bear thinkin' about...”

She looked back up, and Claire could have sworn she saw tears of gratefulness twinkling there for a moment before she left, heading back down the road where Claire felt she should be safe to return to her family without trouble.

Well, now that mess was taken care of, she was about to return to the Quicksand to inform Momodi what just happened. But no sooner did she turn around did another voice speak up.

“Ever the selfless hero, I see,” purred a familiar voice, immediately causing Claire’s head to jerk up at the sound. To her surprise, standing before her was none other than Y’shtola. Claire hadn’t seen her since the feast in Limsa, yet here she was, grinning from ear to ear as if she was the miqo'te who got the cream.

“It has been a while, adventurer,” she said pleasantly.

“You...?” Claire began, turning back to face her as Y’shtola was smiling brighter than ever before.

“I have been watching you closely ever since you flew out of Limsa Lominsa,” she confessed and
Claire blinked in confusion, her eyebrows tilting a little suspiciously as Y’shtola went on, “You discharged your duty as the Admiral’s personal envoy with admirable humility, and you have displayed unfaltering courage in the face of danger ever since. Whenssoever you came upon those in need, you gave them succor with no thought of personal gain. In summary, you have demonstrated all the qualities we seek in an adventurer.”

Claire let her go on for a while, suspecting that this woman was not one who gave out compliments easily. But she didn’t like it. What reason would she have to spy on her?

“For reasons I cannot well explain, your every deed seems invariably to serve the general good… whether you mean it to or not,” Y’shtola went on, who also seemed to realize that she was dancing around the subject, “It is a happy knack, and one which speaks volumes for your character!”

Y’shtola then closed her eyes as memories entered her own thoughts.

*A few minutes ago*

“So, she has your blessing then?” Y’shtola asked as they watched the adventurer finish cleaning up the mess between frightened woman and her would-be tormentors.

“Of course,” Thancred said, also watching with a judgmental eye, “Any who would come to the rescue of a damsel in distress has my respect. I must admit, I feel as if I am falling in love.”

“Behave,” Y’shtola warned as the frightened men ran as if there was a monster nipping at their heels. “Should she join us, I expect you to be on your best behavior. Make her feel welcomed… but nothing more than that.”

“Now, now, you know me better than that,” he reassured her. “I promise, I will treat her like a lovely young lady and nothing more. If she wishes for more than that, I will leave it up to her.”

“That is all I ask,” Y’shtola said with her lips twitching slightly, as if she highly doubted that would ever happen. “Well, I believe I shall go out and speak to her on the subject. I will speak with you anon. oh, and just so you know, Minfilia would like you to visit more often. I think she fears for your health.”

“Ah, I am touched,” Thancred grinned before giving Y’shtola a bow and a fond farewell. “But she need not worry. If I fell ill over a little work, then I would make a poor excuse for a Scion, would I not?”

*Y’shtola*

Y’shtola came back to the present when she felt those green eyes on her. Claire was as silent as ever—such a difference compared to the other Scions, with the exception being Urianger, of course. Though even he seemed to speak more than she did. Up till now, she didn’t even think that possible.

“Yet for all your admirable qualities, it is your gift which intrigues me most,” she went on, getting straight to the matter at hand. “I speak of the visions you experience. Visions like the one you had mere moments ago, if I am not mistaken. I can provide you with the means to understand them.”

Claire’s eyes widen at that as she asked, “But how…?”

“An acquaintance of mine is blessed with the selfsame talent, you see… if you so desire, I can introduce you to her,” Y’shtola explained, glad that she got her attention. “She and I fight for a common cause—a cause which would greatly benefit for your support.
Claire’s brow furrowed, but it was more out of curiosity than suspicion as she repeated, “Your… cause?”

“If you would agree to lend us your strength, we should be glad to do all within our power to aid you in your personal endeavors,” Y’shtola informed her politely, knowing that it wasn’t a wise idea to talk about such matters in an open place like this. “Think on my offer awhile. Should you decide to accept it, pray speak with Momodi. The proprietress of the Quicksand is a close friend and ally of ours.”

She then walked by, pausing only to stand beside her and added, “Inform her that you have been chosen by the Scions of the Seventh Dawn, and she will tell you where to find us.”

She then walked off, feeling the adventurer’s eyes on her retreating form as she reached up to her linkpearl and called the Waking Sands. “’Tis I. I am returning for a time and I’ll be there soon. I have something that I wish to discuss with you.”

*Claire*

Claire wasn’t sure what to think anymore.

She had retreated to the back of the inn inside the Quicksand where she was able to find a spare bathroom for her to get cleaned up. She stripped down, leaving her filthy clothes on the ground before she began to get clean for the first time in days. But the entire time that she scrubbed, she couldn’t help but repeat the brief conversation that Y’shtola gave her.

She sighed as she rested her arms on the edge of the tub, dripping water out and onto the floor—though she didn’t really notice at that point as she thought long and hard about her choice.

She still didn’t know anything about Y’shtola and these Scions of the Seventh Dawn. She had never even heard of that name before today. Surely if it was a good thing, then she would have heard it before today, right?

What if this was like a cult like the Lambs of Dalamud? Or a gang of criminals looking for a strong recruit? But then she remembered others in Limsa vouching for Y’shtola’s character so she couldn’t be all bad. But then why were they so secretive? She had given her no reason to think that anything good could come from this?

As she thought more and more, the worse the idea seemed to become to her. So now she was trying to weigh the pros and cons of both decisions and which seemed like a better trade.

After a long discussion inside her own head and all bathwater had turned cold did she feel ready to make up her mind.

With a sigh, she stood and got out of the water, dripping everywhere on the floor as she went rummaging through her bag. Y’shtola had said that if she was interested in joining then she was to speak with Momodi. So that is what she would do. She would speak with her first and if she gave her any reason to be suspicious, then she would leave Ul’dah without thinking twice.

She didn’t see the harm in at least hearing them out.

‘After all,’ she reminded herself, feeling a little better after she changed into her new clothes. ‘It’s not as if they will be expecting me to sell my soul to them. I can walk away later on if I don’t like it.’

*Waking Sands*
Meanwhile, in the Waking Sands, a young man was just finishing a report and handing it over to Minfilia.

“I see,” she said after she finished looking over it. “I will be sure to let the others know your opinions on such matters. I am confident that they will take it into consideration.”

“There is no need to worry on such matters,” Alphinaud reassured her politely. “I am still looking into all states involving the city states and I will hopefully have an answer soon. I am told that a remembrance ceremony for the three nations will soon be underway?”

“Yes,” Minfilia informed him, “They will be beginning in a few days time and all are welcomed to view them.”

“Full glad I am to hear of it,” Alphinaud said thoughtfully, “I believe that I will do just that. I will give you my full opinion on what I have seen afterwards.”

“I am looking forward to it,” Minfilia smiled before looking around, “Oh, by the way. I noticed that Alisaie is not here?”

“No, she has decided to stay in Ul’dah for the time being,” Alphinaud informed her with a shrug. “I wouldn’t worry though, I fear she has very little patience for the more diplomatic side of conversations.”

“Oh, good,” Minfilia sighed in relief as she settled back in her seat. “I fear that I may have unknowingly said or done something that might have offended her. She barely spoke a word the entire time she was first here?”

“She… she can be difficult to warm up to,” Alphinaud confessed slowly, unsure if he should tell her the truth in that his dear sister is far from impressed on this land of Eorzea. “I am certain that once she gets used to the change in scenery, she will be more talkative. Believe it or not, she is even more opinionated than I am.”

They shared a light chuckle before he began to press her for more information regarding the Ascians.

“I fear that I understand them very little,” he confessed, “Grandfather mentions them in his journal more than once, but never really went into details about them.”

“Then that would make three of us,” Minfilia sighed with a shrug. “I wish I could tell you more, but finding information on them has been no small task. We do know that they are the ones who sow the seeds of discord and chaos… like a whisper in the shadows. How they do so or why… I am afraid that we have yet to find answers for. I will be more than happy to tell you of what we have discovered but…?”

But before she could continue, there was a knock on the door.

“Please come in,” Minfilia called, and he watched as the miqo’te Y’shtola stepped inside.

“Forgive me for this unexpected visit,” she said as she shut the doors behind her, “I wished to discuss with you—ah…”

She saw that they weren’t alone and she smiled at him.

“Been awhile since I last saw you, Master Alphinaud,” Y’shtola stated politely at the sight of him. “Everything is going well, I hope?”
“Nothing too important,” he answered back with a shrug, “We are doing as well as can be expected. Tell me, is it true that there is a threat of the Amalj’aa summoning Ifrit again in the near future?”

“Merely a suspicion. Nothing more,” she answered. “Though all our sources point to it. We must be ready for the worse. We will have an investigation set up as soon as everyone is here. If the Amalj’aa are, indeed, planning to summon their god, then we must fear for the lives of all those who have been kidnapped. If at all possible, we may be able to mount a rescue. But you are more than welcomed to listen…?”

“No, I fear that I will have more work to do,” he courteously refused. “I will do all that I can to find out all I can about the Ascians and to get help to the cause if I am able. I will entrust the matter to your capable hands.”

She nodded before she looked to Minfilia and asked, “Will the others be here soon?”

“I received word from Papalymo that he and Yda will be here very shortly,” she answered. “As for Thancred, he promised that he would be here later once he finishes up some work in the city.”

“Good,” Y’shtola said with another nod. “I want them all here to welcome Claire.”

“Claire? The adventurer?” Minfilia asked in great surprise. “You mean…?”

“I watched her very closely since she left Limsa,” she answered. “And I have to say that I like what I saw. She carried her role perfectly as envoy. Humble and polite she bore the message to those that she was charged with, as well as showing unfailing courage when the situation called for it. And whenever she came across someone in need of aid, she stepped up to do so without any hesitation or thought of reward accept for words of gratitude. Just earlier, I witnessed one such display when she helped a woman in Ul’dah.”

“I can confirm it,” Alphinaud said with a smile, getting both of their attention with mild surprise as he confessed having been in the city itself when he saw the issue with the woman and the dodo meat.

“I cannot say how it is, maybe by fate, but every deed that she does seems to help the greater good,” Y’shtola stated thoughtfully. “All in all, I believe that she’s someone whom the Scions have been looking for. Of that I am convinced.”

“You think that she is the one, then?” Minfilia asked at once and he looked at them in confusion.

“Impossible to say,” Y’shtola replied. “But the fact is she has been chosen by the Mother Crystal. If you meet her, you will most likely agree that the power of the Echo is strong in her.”

“Excuse me, but what did you mean by when you said, ‘the one’?,” Alphinaud could not help but cut in and the other two blushed a little at his question.

“It happened… shortly before the Calamity,” Minfilia sighed, sounding a little embarrassed at even speaking about it. “I only met Louisoix in person once. Though I had been in contact with him for a long time before that. The last thing that he ever said to me was ‘Darker days lie ahead. But know that where there is darkness, there will always be light.’ And he said to me that when the one who bears the light comes to stand before us. One who is gifted with the Echo. Together, we will greet the dawn.”

The words seemed to hang in the air for a moment before shivers went down their spines. It was all too easy for all of them to imagine those same words spoken by a wise old man who had stood in
this very room in the days before the Calamity struck.

Alphinaud gulped down the unexpected emotion that rose up inside him and cleared his throat.

“So,” he said, after several deep breaths, “So… You think that this adventurer, Claire, is the one?”

“She is one of Hydaelyn’s chosen,” Y’shtola confirmed firmly. “Of that there is no doubt in my mind. As well as the fact that she has so far shown to be unfailingly brave and a kind soul whom has yet to forsake someone when they need help. It’s impossible to say, but if I had to guess, I would want to believe that she is the one. In either case, I think that her lending her strength to our cause will be able to benefit the Scions tremendously.”

“Oh, you mean she has accepted the invitation?” Minfilia asked excitedly.

“Not yet,” Y’shtola answered, having decided not to stay too long and influence the young woman’s decision. She had wanted her to make a choice on her own, not be influenced by anyone else. “I had informed her to take her time and think it over. But I have a feeling that she won’t be needing much time to think about it. I informed her that if she decides to take up the offer she need only speak to Momodi at the Quicksand. And I informed Tataru that we may be having a guest here shortly. The rest is up to Claire.”

“You seem fairly confident that she’ll come,” Alphinaud stated suddenly. “But she doesn’t know anything about who we are or what we do. How can you expect her to trust us when she doesn’t know if she can?”

“We will give her an explanation should she arrive to meet with us,” Minfilia reassured him. “The choice is ultimately hers, of course, and should she chose to come, we will do our upmost to assist her in her ventures as an adventurer. Either way, we will begin to decide on what to do about the possible threat of Ifrit. Some days ago there had been a caravan carrying a large cargo of crystals to Amajina & Sons was waylaid and stolen. We must decide with or without the adventurer’s aid in this matter.”

“Well, I wish you luck,” Alphinaud answered them, though he was finding it hard to understand why they were so worked up over meeting just one adventurer?
After agreeing to meet with the Scions of the Seventh Dawn, Claire is immediately given her first task. She is investigating the recent kidnappings taking place around Thanalan. So she sets off with Thancred for the first time, ready to delve into the mystery of these disappearances.

Once Claire was cleaned up and felt somewhat normal again, she left her inn room to report back to Momodi. Though she was still apprehensive about the idea of these Scions of the Seventh Dawn, she could not deny that she was greatly curious about this whole thing.

By the time that she approached the desk, she found that Momodi was speaking to another adventurer, who was looking a bit nervous.

“Scenes like that are becomin' ever more common, I'm afraid. Don't worry, though--if you work hard, you'll probably be all right. Sayin' that, if you ever find yourself in a spot of bother, come and see me,” she was saying to him as if enjoying herself. “Just don't go pesterin' me every time you graze your knee, eh?”

The young man turned a little red, which Momodi noticed and gave a little grin as well as a wink as she added, “Course, I do enjoy hearin' tell of a gentleman's woes with the womanfolk from time to time...” She chuckled when she saw the adventurer nod and hurry off before Momodi spotted her.

“Ah, Claire! Sorry to keep you waitin'--I was just providin' guidance to a fresh-off-the-carriage adventurer,” Momodi informed her happily before looking her over as if checking for injuries. When she seemed satisfied that Claire was in the same shape she was when she last stood here, she told her, “But gods, it's good to see you safe and well! To look at you, no one would ever guess you'd been hard at it with giants in the dark!”

Claire could only shrug as Momodi folded her arms with a grin.

“You're every ilm the adventurer Miounne said you'd be, Claire,” she said, “The stationmaster will be overjoyed when he hears the news!”

While she was glad to hear that, she still could not help but think back to those poor giants and felt terrible weight of guilt nestle into her heart. Before she could mention this, however, Momodi’s eyes widen as if she almost forgotten something and added quickly, “Oh, before I forget! There's a lass here who wants a word with you.

For one moment, she thought for sure that she was talking about Y’shtola again, but when Momodi gestured for someone to come closer, she finished, “Didn't actually know your name, but hearin' her description, I knew who she meant right away.”

Claire turned in time to see a young woman approach before her and, in all honesty, she was taken aback. She recognized the girl at once—though the last time she saw her, she was in tears when she had been abandoned by her comrades at the Carline Canopy. The same young conjurer who had lost someone she cared about from the undead in the Tam-Tara Deepcroft.
“Hello,” she said to the girl, who blushed nervously.

“Th-Thank you for sparing the time,” the girl stuttered. “I realize you don't know me, but I've been longing to speak with you for a while now. My name is Edda. I'm an adventurer like you, though I'm...not very good at being one, if truth be told.”

Now she was sure that wasn’t true… though after remembering seeing how her so-called ‘comrades’ treated her before, she could understand why she felt that way.

“Anyway, I was adventuring with my friends in Gridania when...when...” Edda rubbed her eyes a little and became downcast as she mumbled, “I-I'm sorry. We were in Gridania...when the leader of our party was killed.”

She didn’t speak as she could tell that Edda was struggling with this but wanted desperately to confess her woes to someone.

“His name was Avere, and he and I...were to be wed in the spring,” she finally choked out and Claire felt her heart constrict in sorrow for the poor girl. “You may not remember him, but to say that he remembered you would be an understatement. He would sing your praises from dawn to dusk.”

Claire honestly had no idea that someone out there would look up to her in such a way and she felt her face turn a little red as she replied, “I don’t know what to say but... thank you.”

This seemed to please Edda and she said, “He saw you for what you are, you see--an adventurer's adventurer--and swore that he would be like you one day.” But the smile soon faded away to be replaced with a sadness in her eyes as she looked down to the floor, continuing. “I believe that he would have succeeded...had a fiend not robbed him of the chance. Since that day, I have thought long and hard about giving up adventuring.”

Claire opened her mouth, though she wasn't entirely sure what she could say to help ease this pain. She wanted to encourage her to do what she felt was right, and to continue on for both her and Avere, but how can you tell someone you just met something like that? But Edda looked up, a new shine in her eyes as she went on, “But when I think of the woman you are--of all that you've achieved – I find that I am inspired, just as Avere once was. And so I've decided to start again as an adventurer. I will go back to the village of my birth and begin my training anew. But I wanted to meet you first... to ask you your name.”

Again, Claire was startled by this, but she couldn’t help but beam back as she told her kindly, “Again, I'm not sure what to say but... thank you. But my name is Claire Faye. And I wish you the best of luck wherever you go, Edda.”

Edda beamed back, some of the hurt fading from her face as she curtseyed back.

“Claire Faye...I shan't forget,” she promised, “Thank you, Claire Faye. I pray that we will meet again. Fare you well!”

“Be careful out there,” Claire told her as Edda waved and left, a new confidence in her step that hadn’t been there before. Once she had left through the doors of the Quicksand, she heard Momodi speak again.

“Adventurin' can be a cruel bleedin’ business...” she sighed, “Time was, I didn't know why anyone would bother. When they first asked me to take charge of the guild here, I didn't want aught to do with you lot--thought it'd be a right pain in the arse looking after you all.”
She looked back as Momodi chuckled a little embarrassed at that line of thought, but then added, “But against my better judgment, I decided to accept the post...and I'm full glad I did. I feel privileged to be a part of your lives. And that goes double for yours, Claire!”

Claire was sure getting a lot of praise these days. She wasn’t sure she would ever get used to it; but she thanked Momodi for that before she thought back to the reason she came here. She was still undecided about these Scions, but after speaking with Edda, she wanted to continue on doing good in the world. So, taking Edda’s kind words to heart, she worked up the courage to ask.

“Yes,” Claire said absent-mindedly. “Pardon me, Miss Momodi. But I have a question for you. I was told that I was... chosen by the Scions of the Seventh Dawn?”

Momodi’s eyes widen at those last few words.

“...What did you say? You want to know about the Scions of the Seventh Dawn?” she asked. And when Claire nodded, she became pensive as she muttered, “They're beginnin' to move in earnest, then...”

She wasn’t sure if she liked the way she said that.

“I just want to know... what are they?” she pressed for information. “I was told to seek you out on the matter?”

Momodi nodded to that as she looked up, her face deadly serious, declaring, “Listen, Claire--the Scions ain't no ordinary folk, and the work they do ain't no ordinary work. I know full well how capable you are, but even you would think twice about attemptin' some of the stuff they do. Knowin' that, if you're still certain you want to get involved, I'll tell you what I can.”

“I can handle whatever they throw at me,” Claire answered without even thinking twice about what she was saying, which caused Momodi to laugh.

“So you want to know more, then, do you? Well, that ain't a surprise...” she laughed, grinning up at her. “I swear, if I pained 'CERTAIN DEATH' on one door and 'LIMITLESS WEALTH' on another, nine out of ten adventurers would go through the first, and the other bloke wouldn't be able to choose, on account of bein' Ul'dahn.”

She continued with a long chuckle before her face began serious again.

“Anyway, don't say I didn't warn you,” she informed her. “First of all, if you're wonderin' whether you can trust these 'Scions of the Seventh Dawn', you can. They're good people who've made it their mission to solve some of Eorzea's most pressin' problems. 'Course, that ain't no small task, so they're always lookin' for dependable individuals to join 'em--individuals like you, Claire.”

Well, that caused some of her nerves to be put to rest. At least she wasn’t dealing with a cult or criminal organization here. But the fact that they solve some of Eorzea’s most pressing problems…? That seemed vague to her.

“Now, I've been given leave to tell you where to find the Scions, but you must promise to keep this information to yourself,” Momodi informed her, sounding serious again, “As you can probably imagine, it's somethin' Eorzea's enemies would very much like to know.”

Claire nodded, promising she wouldn’t tell anyone else about this before Momodi seemed satisfied.

After taking a quick glance around to make sure that there was no one else was listening in, she asked her to lean in. She then whispered to her, “The Scions are headquartered in Vesper Bay, out
in western Thanalan. The place you're lookin' for is called the Wakin' Sands. Give your name to whoever's at the entrance, and you'll be let in.”

She then leaned back and finished, with a smile and a wink, “You're a woman in demand, Claire, and the days ahead promise to be busy, but I hope you won't forget about them as helped make you into the adventurer you are. Drop in and tell 'em how you're farin' from time to time, you hear?”

“I will,” she promised, which got Momodi’s approval.

“Good to hear,” the Lalafell told her cheerfully before giving her a little nudge towards the door. “Right, well, I've said my piece. Off you go!”

After taking time to thank her for her help, she left the Quicksand, soon finding herself back out upon the streets of Ul’dah, thinking everything over. So, what was she supposed to do now? These Scions seemed like good people—according to Momodi anyway—and she had no reason to doubt otherwise. And if she really wanted to go and meet with them, they weren’t too far either. She paused in the street as she glanced up to see a few fluffy clouds pass over her, blocking out the sun and giving her a little relief from the heat.

Once more she was conflicted.

She could not deny that she was greatly curious about this organization, as well as the work they do that ain't no ordinary work. She still had the rest of Eorzea to explore as well as no immediate problems or dungeons to run through this time. So, after a few more minutes of weighing her options, she decided that she would meet with them in person and hear what they have to say. If she didn’t like what she heard, she would politely refuse and leave. At least she didn’t have to worry about being attacked by any of them if this organization was as good as Momodi claimed.

With that thought in mind, she wandered out through the Gates of the Sultana and back into Western Thanalan. She knew the way to go, at least—knowing that she would just have to take the opposite path that led to Copperbell. She ventured across the hot sands, passing over the bridge she already took earlier that day until she reached the fork in the road and went left this time, following it all the way to the small settlement of Horizon. She entered the hamlet and gazed about at the adventurers wandering about and the stalls set up for selling. A few spotted her and were asking her to purchase from them, which she kindly refused as she considered searching for her destination. A Brass Blade she passed was more than happy to tell her where to go, pointing towards a tunnel that led to another steep incline and explained that she was to follow it until she came out to a small oasis known as the Footfalls. After that, she was to follow it west… if she were to go south, it would take her to Crescent Cove—but if she was looking for Vesper Bay—she would follow the rough pathway until she reached another tunnel. When she spotted the large bronze statue of a Lalafell, she would know she was in the right place.

She soon found the tunnel and tracks and continued along it just as the Brass Blade told her to. Eventually, she came out into a muddy oasis and began to trudge her way through, passing by old ruins and statues as she traipsed through the water and mud—avoiding the buzzards and other nasty pests that seemed to have made this place their home.

She spotted the statue just before she exited the next tunnel and came out to the small gates that led to the tiny settlement of Vesper Bay. There wasn’t much to say about this place—perhaps a little nicer than Horizon was—if a little more cramped together. But she enjoyed the atmosphere as she gazed about curiously at all that she could see. She stopped by a small inn to order herself a quick drink before she continued on, searching about for these Waking Sands.

After looking about for a bit, she eventually came to stand at the docks, right next to a building that
—at first—she mistook for an old warehouse. But that was when she felt the now familiar sensation that what she was looking for was in there. She wasn’t sure of how to put it... like a little voice inside her was directing her footsteps there.

She looked over the entire building and couldn’t help but be expecting something a little more impressive, but who was she to judge? Though, now that she was here, she couldn’t help but feel a little self-conscious with the mud and water clinging to the bottom of her robe and boots. But hey, they must be ready for something like this if they recruit adventurers.

No one answered even when she knocked, so she just stepped inside, gazing around. It was a small place, but was warmly lit and had a somewhat homey feel to the whole thing as she looked around at the dark stone. There wasn’t much in here aside from a flight of stairs that led downwards to a basement level—and a small table in the center of the room with a Lalafell standing upon a chair.

She was a sweet-looking Lalafell, with a rather innocent smile underneath a shock of lilac-colored hair. She didn’t seem to have noticed that there was anyone else here with her, instead she stood on her chair and was singing in a contended way.

“Deep in the desert of my heart...

A lonely flower blooms...

Yearning for the heavens above...

To quench my thirst for you...”

She continued to hum to herself happily as Claire approached. Before she could gently interrupt her, however, the Lalafell turned her head and spotted her. The realization that she wasn’t alone caused her to jump and let out a loud cry. After realizing that she was in no danger, she cleared her throat before saying squeakily, her cheeks blushing from embarrassment, “I would thank you not to sneak up on me like that!”

Claire held up her hands, showing that she meant no harm before the Lalafell huffed out, like a mother scolding a child for being too noisy, “Now, please be advised that this is private property. Unless you have pertinent business here, I must ask you to--”

“Um, I'm here on request of Y’shtola...?” Claire interrupted her quietly, wondering if she had come to the wrong place after all. As soon as she said Y’shtola’s name, however, the Lalafell’s attitude changed completely.

“Here at the behest of Y’shtola!?” she gasped out before going on, “My sincerest apologies! May I please have your name?”

“Claire. My name is Claire Faye,” she answered, back as the Lalafell turned to the stack of papers in front of her, scanning through the pages.

“Claire Faye...Claire Faye... Ah, here you are!” she said, happy to have found the name. She then cleared her throat before turning back, a big smile on her face as she said welcomingly, “I bid you welcome to the Waking Sands, headquarters of the Scions of the Seventh Dawn!”

Claire smiled back, not sure if there was something she should say or do. Perhaps the Lalafell sensed this for she added, “My name is Tataru, and I look forward to assisting you during your time with us.”

She nodded as Tataru smiled brightly, pointing to the stairs behind them and explained,”The
Antecedent is within the solar. I shall let her know to expect you.”

“Thank you,” Claire said as Tataru hopped down from her chair and led the way. After she unlocked the door, she showed her down a long corridor that reminded her of the Quicksand, though more warmly lit. Claire looked around at the lack of furnishings or even people as pointed ahead of them to where she saw a set of double doors standing there with a couple guards on either side.

“Now, you just head on through there,” Tataru directed, “I think that everyone else is here to greet you as well, including Y’shtola.”

Everyone? Just how many people was she expected to meet here?

“Oh, don’t you worry,” Tataru reassured her, “Everyone here is really nice, and I know that they will give you a warm welcome.” She then gave her a little push in the back, though her tiny hands could only reach up to her legs.

So, taking one last deep breath, she approached the guard, who smiled back.

“I take it you are Claire Faye. Tataru sent word that you had arrived. Lady Minfilia has eagerly awaited your coming,” the guard said before she knocked on the door and opened it for her. “This way, if you please.”

Claire took only a brief second to brace herself before she stepped inside.

She stepped into a brightly lit and warm room, with a few bookcases upon the walls with a small bench for sitting; there was also a large ornate desk at the back, just underneath a grand image of a broken staff upon the wall that seemed to glint slightly.

But her attention was drawn to the group of people—all who appeared to have been waiting for her. One of them, she recognized as Y’shtola. But there were a couple others, including a young woman who was dressed in a white jacket, fingerless gloves, and pair of red armored grieves. Her most distinctive feature was a mask that covered half of her face as well as a strange contraption—not unlike the one that Y’shtola wore—on front of her turban. Standing next to her was a Lalafell with short blond hair, bright blue eyes, and wearing a dark robe with bright yellow gauntlets as well as carrying another similar contraption on his chest. When he turned his head to look at her, she saw he had a monocle in his right eye as well and was gazing at her with polite curiosity.

Standing next to Y’shtola was a good-looking Hyur with white hair and dressed in black. She looked at him curiously as he gave her a winning smile, and a flirty twinkle in his eyes that made her feel a little embarrassed just by looking at him.

Standing behind them was an Elezen—at least that was the best that she could make out because he was almost completely covered. He was wearing a long black and white cloak with his hood pulled over his head and covered his ears. Like Y’shtola and some of the others, he had a strange tattoo—only his was on his face instead of his neck—though it was mostly covered by the goggles that hid his eyes.

Finally, there was a Hyur woman, who looked to be only a little older than her, who was standing in front. She had blond hair tied up in back and was wearing a strange attire of a midriff-less dress of purple and blues that looked more for decorative purposes than anything. But she had a very kind smile when she looked up to see her there and was the first to speak.

“So you're the adventurer of whom I’ve heard so much,” she said, her arms open in welcome. “Well
met, friend. My name is Minfilia, and I lead the Scions of the Seventh Dawn. I have awaited your coming."

Awaited her coming? Why did that sound more ominous than it should? She pushed that out of her mind as she looked around at them all, slowly approaching, not sure what she should be saying anything. She didn’t like so many strangers looking at her.

Minfilia laughed gently as she moved to stand behind the desk and told her, “Please, be at ease. You are among friends here.”

Claire felt some of her unease fade as she stepped closer, giving a smile to Y’shtola—being the only one whom she knew.

“No doubt you're ripe to burst with questions, but have patience—all will be revealed in time,” Minfilia said, noticing how she was looking around at them. “First, let me begin by telling you who we are and what we do.”

‘That would be a good place to start,’ she could not help but think to herself.

Minfilia then gestured to herself and everyone around her as she explained, “We are the Scions of the Seventh Dawn, an order that transcends political boundaries. Our single objective is the preservation of the future of Eorzea. Among our gravest concerns are the god-like beings known as the primals.”

There was that word again. She still had no idea what primals were, nor why they were considered to be so much of a problem. But it looked like she was finally going to find out. What she didn’t understand was how they could be considered god-like beings. Just how powerful are they?

“Their existence is a bane upon Eorzea--nay, the world at large, and we have striven to find a lasting solution to the threat they pose,” Minfilia explained, “Our order is home to a number of individuals who, like you, possess a rare and special talent. This talent takes various forms, but one holds particular interest for us. She paused, there for a moment before asking, a little more seriously, “Tell me, have you ever experienced a sudden, inexplicable loss of consciousness? Have you ever had the sensation of being pulled away from reality? Felt as though you were hovering in space, a mind without a body?”

Claire blinked at that, her mouth falling open slightly at that. Yes, she explained it perfectly… these… visions were both miraculous and not a little terrifying—and she had no idea how they happened or why they were happening. She nodded, staring at her with a stunned expression.

Minfilia nodded knowingly as she confessed, “All these things are the manifestations of your talent. Yours is the power to transcend the boundaries of the soul--a power known as the Echo.”

The Echo. She could vaguely recall Y’shtola explaining something like that before. Suddenly, this explained so much already. She finally had an answer—or at least a name—to give to what was happening. She wasn’t going crazy, but then, what was it?

“The Echo allows you to pass through the walls of a man's soul, and hear the resonations of his past,” Minfilia explained to her, “You will be there in his memories, and see things as he saw them. You may even interact with that which you see, though you cannot change the outcome of events.” She smiled even wider before adding, “For another blessing, the Echo will enable you to know a man's mind even if you cannot comprehend his words.”

So, that was how she was able to walk in Y’shtola’s and the Admiral’s memories. What she saw
were truly events from the past, as well as explain the strange words spoken by that masked mage she faced before. Though, despite knowing what was going on, she was still unsure of how she felt about it. She never asked for this… ‘gift’. Nor could she claim that she had this power before coming to Eorzea. Why was that? Why would she suddenly be given a so-called gift that she had never even heard of simply by coming to a new land? She didn’t understand.

“In short,” Minfilia concluded, bringing her out of her thoughts, “the Echo is a truly extraordinary power. And this power is strong within you. It is only a shame that we cannot use it whenever we choose.”

So, they can’t help her learn to control or get rid of it. She could not help but feel a bit disappointed in that. She did not enjoy looking through another person’s eyes and into a past that would most likely be considered private. While it was useful, she didn’t like how it made her feel. Yet, as soon as she finished that thought, she just realized what Minfilia said.

She looked at her curiously as Minifila smiled wider and confirmed her suspicion, “That's right. I too possess the Echo. With that established, let us return to the subject of the primals.”

Minfilia closed her eyes sadly as she told her, “So long as they exist, the realm cannot take so much as a single step towards true peace. Measures must be taken--measures which transcend boundaries, be they of faction, race, language or creed. And to do so, the Scions require the aid of those with our talent. Make no mistake--the Echo will be instrumental in dealing with the primal threat. Without it, we cannot hope to save the realm.”

She smiled warmly again at Claire, gesturing towards her. “I know not what it is you desire for yourself, nor what it was that first brought you to adventure. But I firmly believe that the power we possess was given to us for a purpose.” She folded her arms again and finished, “Why else would the gods entrust man with a gift so extraordinary, if not to have him use it?”

This was getting a bit too deep for her. She honestly didn’t ever ask to get involved in such problems with the world. The reason she came here to begin with was for…?

But her thoughts stopped there as she allowed herself to really think about what Minfilia was saying. If it was true, and they needed this… gift… for the better of the people here, then why shouldn’t she use it? But she still didn’t know anything about her or the people here—nor did any of them know anything about her. They said it was her decision, so why did it suddenly feel like she had no other choice?

Minfilia leaned forwards, looking earnest as she thought it over, pleading, “And so I implore you, lend us your power. Naturally, your aid will not go unrewarded. We are fortunate to have a number of influential allies, and at a word from me, they will gladly afford you certain privileges that might otherwise be denied you.”

Why did that sound like bribe to her?

“Well, I’ve given you a veritable lecture, have I not?” Minfilia asked her, “Forgive me, but it important that all concerned are aware of what it expected of them. Now you know our purpose, and what we can offer you – if ever you so choose to accept it. I invite you to consider joining us. When you have come to a decision, though I believe I already know your answer, you may tell me without fear of censure.”

Claire was still on the fence about the whole thing, but Minfilia didn’t look like she was waiting for a direct answer. She was still smiling as she told her, “In good faith, I shall entrust you with our order's password, which our member use to reach one another when afield. It is 'wild rose'. Pray
keep it safe.”

Claire nodded as she felt the curious eyes all upon her. When she turned to look at them, they all looked away and began to discuss things quietly among themselves—as if they were just looking for something to do. Claire turned back to Minfilia and asked her a few more questions... though, to be honest, while their cause seemed noble to her... their goals were very... unclear. The end result was helping to bring peace to Eorzea, but she wasn’t entirely sure if they knew which road to take. But then again, they didn’t seem like bad people to her and she remembered everything that Edda said to her mere bells ago.

So, after a time of thinking everything over, she made her decision. And told Minfilia that she decided to go whither the ‘wild rose’ blooms.

Minfilia chuckled a little at that and said, “I take it that means you will help us.”

And when she nodded, Minfilia couldn’t have looked happier.

“Wonderful!” she exclaimed happily, “I knew you wouldn’t let us down.” Glancing around the room, she gestured around at the other Scions to come in closer. “But come, I would introduce you to your friends in the order. Tell me, does the name Sharlayan ring any bells?”

She had heard of Sharlayan before, but only in passing. She knew that there was a nation of Sharlayan upon an isle just outside of Eorzea, but she had never been there before nor claimed to know much about it except that it was an isle full of scholars.

“It used to be one of Eorzea’s six city-states, and was situated northwest of Aldenard. The Sharlayans were the keepers of wisdom both old and new,” Minfilia explained, “Their mastery over magick and aether was unsurpassed, and even the Garleans knew to fear them. Among their number, there were a noble few who devoted their lives to safeguarding the future of Eorzea. When the realm began its descent into chaos, and their countrymen fled for the motherland, they alone chose to remain here. These noble men and women were called the Archons.”

She made a wide gesture, encompassing all those in the room. “Those same brave souls stand before you now.”

And then she began to introduce all the others. She turned first to the masked woman and the Lalafell next to her on her left.

“The masked woman is Yda, and beside her is Papalymo,” she said as Claire turned to look at them, “The two are charged with surveying the Twelveswood.”

“Hello there!” Yda said cheerfully and with a friendly wave.

“Well come!” Papalymo added and she nodded to them politely.

“Ohayou!” Yda went enthusiastically. “My turn to introduce someone! That there is Thancred!”

She then pointed to the other side of the room to where the Hyur was standing beside Y’shtola.

“He is our man here in Ul’dah, jewel of the desert,” Papalymo added as Thancred gave her a small wink and Claire raised her eyebrows at him in a rather playful way—which seemed to amuse him.

“Welcome to the team,” he said graciously, looking to Y’shtola and told her, “Now if I may, the lovely maiden beside me is named Y’shtola. Limsa Lominsa has the pleasure of being under her care.”
“Greetings,” Y’shtola said formally, “I’ve been expecting you.”

She then was next to introduce the last member, the robed Elezen, and finished, “Last but not least is Urianger, who presides over all affairs within these halls. Pray seek him out whenever you have questions.”

The Elezen nodded solemnly when she turned her attention to him. And when he spoke, he said in a deep, solemn voice, “Dawn may banish even the darkest night.”

She gave him a confused glance as she saw a smile flicker across his face as he explained, “The words of a dear friend. I am glad of our meeting.”

“At the Battle of Carteneau, our leader was taken from us,” she heard Y’shtola explain, “But we did not stray from our purpose. We sought out Minfilia and others with her talent, and together established the Scions of the Seventh Dawn.”

“Along with the Archons, those with the Echo play a pivotal role in our endeavor to forge a brighter tomorrow for the realm,” Minfilia nodded in agreement before adding, with an even wider smile, “Oh! I should also introduce you to Tataru, our clerk. She ensures that everything runs smoothly.”

She gestured towards the door behind where the little Lalafell had just entered.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance!” Tataru chirped happily and Claire nodded back.

“In time, I hope you will come to think of us as family,” Minfilia said warmly when Claire looked back. “But without further ado... I would assign you your first task.”

She was a little taken aback by this. She only now just joined but they were giving her work to do? Why did she have a feeling that she was going to be very busy for the foreseeable future? Rather than say anything like that, she nodded as Minfilia looked pleased with her answer. She then turned to Urianger and asked, “Urianger, have the documents arrived from the Students of Baldesion?”

“Aye, my lady,” he responded in that same grim tone—striking Claire as someone who was the grim and brooding type. “They arrived but recently.”

He then pulled out a sheet of parchment and handed it over so that she could examine it. Claire was’t sure what was written there, but whatever it was caused a frown of worry on Minfilia’s face before she looked up.

“We have received a request for aid from the Immortal Flames,” she said in a well-organized way. She then added to Thancred next to her, “Thancred, would you do the honors?”

“It would be my pleasure,” he said, before glancing over at Claire once more, looking delighted to be taking center stage. “Some days ago, a crystal caravan registered to Amajina & Sons Mineral Concern was waylaid and divested of its cargo. But there is more. Within a bell of the robbery, several people were reported missing from the shantytown outside the city.”

A crystal caravan? Why would they steal from one of those? Sure, they were useful in crafting—as she found out—but she saw little point in why anyone would go out robbing one of them when they seem to be pretty easy to get through other, less violent, means. She’s killed enough sprites to know that much.

“At a glance, one would assume the involvement of bandits, kidnappers, and coincidence,” Minfilia informed her, possibly guessing what she was thinking. “Such crimes are hardly uncommon, and
the Immortal Flames deal with their like almost every day.’ She shook her head, her expression becoming more and more concerned as she added, ‘However, this time we have reason to believe that a primal is involved.’

"Aye, the evidence left behind implicates the Amalj’aa, who are known worshipers of Ifrit,” Thancred added, “If we then consider the objects that were taken, there is no room left for doubt—the crimes were committed in the name of a primal."

A primal. One of these ‘god-like’ beings that the beast tribes worshiped. At least, that was what she understood from before—though she was still left confused. It didn’t help that she sort of stopped listening after a while, their explanation completely lost on her. Ifrit was a name she couldn’t remember ever hearing before. She was about to ask what an ‘Ifrit’ was when Minfilia offered, “That you may better understand the nature of our struggle with the primals, I would have you play the leading role in this investigation.”

Leading role? Seriously, she only just joined and they were giving her a leading role in an investigation that involved kidnapping and theft? Just how short numbered were they? But with her curiosity now reaching an all-time high—wanting to see with her own eyes just what they would consider a ‘god-like’ being—she nodded in agreement.

“You have my thanks,” Minfilia said as she added, gesturing towards Thancred. “If there is aught you wish to know, I recommend you speak with Thancred. He is well versed in the affairs of Ul’dah.”

Thancred bowed once more to both of them as he informed her, “Ever at your service, fair lady.”

It looked like the matter was decided. As everyone was getting ready to go on to the rest of their duties, Claire approached Thancred.

"Ready to begin, are we?” he asked eagerly, “That’s the spirit, my dear!”

He gave her a laugh before crossing his arms, his cheerfulness giving way to a more serious expression as he told her, “So then, your mission is to investigate a crystal robbery and a spate of abductions… Crimes which we believe to be connected. Assuming we are correct, it is like that any discoveries we make in relation to one will further our understanding of the other.”

When Claire nodded in understanding, he continued on, “Now, since the attack on their caravan, our friends at Amajina & Sons Mineral Concern have doubled security over all their shipments. In light of this, it is my judgment that the abductions should be our priority.”

She would hope so. Crystals they could always replace, and she was concerned for all those who were missing.

“According to our preliminary findings, the majority of the missing were last seen in the vicinity of Camp Drybone, so that would seem a fine place to begin,” he told her.

Again she nodded, ready to head off. But just as they were leaving, she saw how Y’shtola grabbed Thancred’s upper arm and pulled him a little closer so that she could whisper something to him. She paused, her sharp hearing picking up the words, “And you better behave yourself. This is her first mission and I expect you to take care of her.”

“Of course, my lady,” he said in a wounded way, as if he couldn’t believe that she would ever have expected anything else from him. “I’ll be the perfect gentleman, never you fear. She’ll be in good hands with me.”
Claire watched as he pulled away from Y’shtola and approached her instead.

He then gave a grand bow, saying, “Will be my great honor to accompany such a lovely maiden.”

Claire smirked at that, suddenly understanding Y’shtola’s concerns.

“I’ll let you lead the way,” she offered.

“Ah, so the lady does speak,” he said with interest as he raised his head. “For one moment, I wondered if you were a mute or something. No offense, but you did not speak the entire time?”

She actually chuckled at that.

“You are not the first,” she said, “Nor will you be the last. I just… prefer not to speak.”

It was true. Though why that was, she wasn’t sure to be honest. She supposed the problem was that she found it difficult in speaking when there were too many people—especially those who are still strangers. It was much easier to speak to those whom she felt comfortable with.

“A lady of few words,” he nodded in understanding, “The strong, silent type. Very well, then I suppose I shall have to do enough talking for us both! Well, come along! Let us away!”

But funnily enough, he was the one who turned and walked out of the Solar first, with her watching him, a little taken aback. She was about to follow when—“Hey…”

She felt someone’s hand on her shoulder and looked back to see that it was Yda. When she had her attention, she whispered, “Don’t worry, he’s harmless. But he if he tries anything, just give him a slap. It’s what Y’shtola usually does.”

“Yda!” Papalymo scolded from behind her.

“What?” she asked in an innocent way, “I’m just saying…?”

Papalymo rolled his eyes at her and added to Claire, “Don’t pay her any mind. Thancred’s mind may tend to wander when he’s face to face with a woman, yet he is always serious whenever on a task. He won’t try anything.”

She hoped so. She really wanted to like Thancred, but there was something… slightly off about him. She pushed it out of her mind though—reminding herself that she had been travelling alone for some time now and so it was bound to be awkward having someone else with her. It was going to take a little time.

Thancred was waiting for her just outside the doors to the Solar, and as soon as she approached him, most of his coquettish mannerisms were gone and he was much more professional when he said, “Well, all right then. A fellow by the name of Isembard serves as the camp’s de facto leader. Pay him a visit, and see that he gives us his full cooperation.”

“Alright,” Claire agreed, feeling apprehensive about this first task. So, all she had to do was look into this matter and see what she could find out about it. That seemed easy enough, finding his antics a little adorable as he was more than happy to fill her in on stories as they headed out together.

*Minfilia*

Minfilia watched them both head out, a little worry in her heart at the thought of sending her out
right away mere moments after agreeing to join them.

“My lady,” Urianger said suddenly from next to her. “Not that I would think to judge thee… but is this wise?”

“As in wondering if maybe I was a little too hasty in giving her a possibly dangerous assignment?” Minfilia questioned, not taking her eyes off the doors, “Perhaps… but…?”

“It shouldn’t be hard, it’s only investigating, right?” Yda chirped up. “How much trouble could they get into? Unless, you really believe that a primal is going to be summoned soon?”

“It’s still too early to say.” Minfilia reasoned. “After all, Ul’ dah has had similar warning signs in the past, but no summonings have been done in recent days.”

They all seemed a bit uneasy at that.

“Thancred is with her,” Y’shtola reasoned, coming closer. “He is very responsible and protective. He’ll make sure to keep her out of trouble. Besides, I know she is capable of handling herself. She had grown stronger than her fight with the golem, after all. But tell me… what do you think?”

“Of our new comrade?” Minfilia questioned.

“Well, I thought she was really nice,” Yda offered. “But she sure didn’t say much. In fact, if Thancred didn’t say anything, I would have thought she didn’t speak?”

“Yda, don’t be rude,” Papalymo scolded again. “This is a lot to take in at once, and she’s bound to have some reservations about joining an organization where she doesn’t know anyone here.”

“She is… quiet. Much quieter than I expected,” Minfilia said softly, her eyes still on the door. “But it felt so… familiar. Much like the Warriors of Light. They had similar mannerisms as well. I’m not sure if that means anything, but to me it’s… comforting.”

She remained silent for a moment as thoughts from long ago filled her head and she gave a sad smile.

“I am ready…” she whispered.

“Hmm?” Y’shtola asked, having heard her words.

“Just… thinking about something that Master Louisoix said to me once,” she reassured her. “But you are right. I’m sure that Thancred will be able to keep things from getting out of hand. Now, about that report you had about the kobolds…?”

*Claire*

Thancred was more than happy to take charge all the way through Thanalan until they reached the eastern part known as Drybone. It certainly earned its name, for just being around here made her throat feel as if she was dying of thirst just looking about. This looked like the people here found a great hole in the ground and dug out enough room for buildings to live in—though she couldn’t imagine why anyone would want to live in a desert.

Thancred sent her off to find Isembard, though he didn’t really give a clear description of the man. However, there was little to worry about, for she soon found an elder gentleman standing by a well in the center of this settlement. She could recognize the worry and anxiety in his face and knew that this was someone who should at least know what was going on.
And when she approached and questioned him, he looked very miserable indeed.

“Aye, I'm Isembard. Here to search for the missing folk, I take it?” he asked, “Minfilia sent word that an adventurer fitting your description would be along.” He let out a long-suffering sigh before finishing, “She also warned us to be wary of the Amalj'aa. It seems we know who the culprits are, at the very least.”

He paused there before looking around the small camp and confessed to her, “Now, I bear no official title at this camp, but the people here have come to look to me for leadership. You have my word that I'll do all I can to help see the victims safely returned.”

She was glad to hear that and she nodded, promising, “And I’ll do all I can to help there.”

He gave a rather feeble smile as he explained, “Let us get right to it, then. Minfilia names the Amalj'aa as culprits in all this. You would do well to investigate them, first. Much harm has been levied on these lands by Amalj'aa hands. The Flames burn where they might, but their light cannot stay the darkness in all places at all times.”

He grew very solemn after that as he told her of murders of callers at the Church of Saint Adama Landama—who had come to pay their respects to the dead. He then asked that she would be kind enough to bring their remains back so that they can receive a proper burial—mayhaps even find some of the Amalj'aa in the area.

So, she left, heading out to perform the grim task. The site was easy enough for her to track down to the south of here. She found the destroyed carriage lying on its side, as well as the remains of broken crates and barrels…. The smell of decaying bodies already reaching her nose by the time that arrived. There were three of them in all, and she was dreading this task more than any other; but as she was getting ready to bring the bodies back she heard a snarl coming from nearby. She looked up in time to see what could only be described as a pair of hulking, scaly lizards draped with red scarves and beads charging straight at her. Apparently, they had been lying in wake for someone to come and investigate the scene of the crime.

This was almost too easy as she ducked underneath them, bringing the axe she brought with her upwards and right into the Amalj’aa’s gut. The other fell like stones right after him and she felt uneasy seeing their blood on her blade. But she turned her investigation back to the trio still on the ground, having to cover her nose and mouth so that she could be able to breathe easy. It was a bit of a challenge having to bring all three bodies back with her, but she managed it somehow. She left the bodies just outside the gates, but made sure that they were in the shade so that the sun wouldn’t do anymore damage to them before they were taken to their final resting place.

She informed Isembard about this, who was torn between grimness and gratitude for her actions.

“I shall send someone to take them to the church,” he promised. “With the bodies given back proper to the earth, their souls will find their way across to the other side. You have done a noble deed this day. I thank you.”

“I only wish there was more I could do,” she told him grimly, having a feeling of sick dread in her stomach at such a deed.

He waved his hand, letting her know that there was nothing more she could do on that.

“Now then,” he frowned, wanting answers, “What of the Amalj’aa? Did you see any? Surely such massive monstrosities as they cannot conceal their presence, much less take their quarry unawares.”
She confirmed this by informing him of the pair that attacked her when she got too close to the destroyed carriage and how it looked as if they were waiting for someone to come looking. This news was not what Isembard was hoping for.

“So there were Amalj’aa remaining, after all… I feared as much,” he told her despairingly, “Their part in the lowborn disappearing is all but confirmed. But I sense there is more to this than meets the eye. The occasional Amalj’aa raiding party would not account for people going missing in these kinds of numbers. The total is too great, and the questions too many. It would not surprise me in the least to learn of another hand in this. But whose?”

What she was having a hard time trying to figure out was, whoever was behind this, how would they be able to kidnap so many people in such a short amount of time? Just what was the purpose for it, and where would they be kept? While it was possible, the odds of them being able to spirit people out of Thanalan in such numbers was slim. So the chances are was that they were still here in Thanalan somewhere…?

That was when she remembered how the Serpent Reavers were determined to try and kidnap people to off up to the Sahagin’s god. Was this the same thing? That the Amalj’aa were trying to sacrifice people to appease a god—a primal? If so, then was it already too late for those victims?

“Countless travelers pass through Drybone every day,” Isembard stated, bringing her out of her dark thoughts, “And even if it were one among them, how would we best discover who may be implicit in these vanishings?”

Claire could only shrug, informing him that, at this point, his guess was as good as hers. Both of them fell silent as they tried to figure out where to go from this point. That was when Isembard seemed to be hit with inspiration.

“Ah, what say we turn an eye to the commonfolk themselves?” he asked her, “It may be among them that we find the reasons for these vanishings. Twelve forbid it be so.” He then pointed behind her to a building that looked like a tavern and asked, “There is a merchant by the name of Ungust who was born here in Drybone and grew up in the Golden Bazaar. A…rough character…” When he said that last part, she could tell from the tone of voice that he did not think highly of this merchant, but he went on without dwelling on it, “but he knows the people here better than anyone else. I’d wager he's there at the inn, quaffing away the day's earnings.”

He then pulled out a piece of worn-looking paper from his pocket and began to scribble a message upon it.

“Here, I'll write a note for you to show him, else he's not like to speak to you,” he said before folding it and handing it to her. “Off you go, now, and luck be with you.”

She could tell from his tone of voice that he did not fully expect this Ungust person to be able to cooperate with them—but was hoping for at least time to figure out what to do. She didn’t complain as she headed off, reaching the tavern and looking around. There weren’t much people here, but she still had no idea who Ungust was. So, she decided to speak with the bartender.

She was sorry she asked.

For he pointed down the end of his bar to where a rather weedy-looking man was enjoying his drink. When she approached though, she felt herself stopping dead in her tracks when she recognized him.

She couldn’t believe it. Of all the people here, she was looking at the same person who had
threatened that poor woman over some dodo meat. She shook her head, wondering what the chances were of running into a guy like him again?

Still, if speaking to him was the only option that she had right now…?

Gods, what did she get herself into?

“Excuse me,” she said, still attempting to keep her tone polite. Who knows? Maybe he was so drunk he won’t remember her. “Are you Ungust?”

He let out a loud belch that she was sure everyone in the tavern could hear before he turned his slightly glazed over eyes at her. Nope… not drunk enough.

“Well, gods be damned!” he hollered, “You're that bloody adventurer who threatened me at the Quicksand! What in the seven hells do you want with me now!?”

Threatened him? He was the one threatening a poor, defenseless woman and she stepped in to stop them from scarring her for life. She had to bite her tongue though, knowing that she couldn’t allow herself to lose it here when there were kidnapped people at stake.

Rather than speak, she shoved the note at him—who read it over with a rather disinterested way before letting out a harsh laugh.

“Folk around here are as wary as they come,” he said, tilting his head back and finishing the rest of his drink. “They'll turn tail and run if you so much as pass wind nearby. Played them all for fools and coaxed some hard labor out of them, I did.”

What a preening, stuck-up arse…

She wasn’t normally one for swearing but boy did she long to do so just this once. She beat those aggressive feelings down again though, reminding herself that she had to at least pretend to play nice if she wanted answers.

“If anything, they're even more timid than before, what with all the disappearances,” Ungust said in a self-satisfied way that made her fingers twitch—as if they wanted to slap him. “You can go talk to 'em yourself if you don't believe me.”

She left before she did something she was going to regret. After she stormed out of the inn, she had to take a few steady breaths so that she doesn’t end up scaring some of the people who were working around the camp. She did take Ungust’s advice in the end, quickly discovering that he was right. Most of the people she approached were very shy and timid, trying to merely keep their heads down and ignore her until she left. She tried again and again, but the people didn’t want anything to do with an outsider like her. Furious, she was left with no choice but to return to Ungust, who let out a loud belching laugh when he saw her.

“Just as I told you, wasn't it? The whole lot of them are terrified,” he laughed as he took another swing of whatever was in the bottle. “There's been talk of folk getting abducted, but if you asked me, they simply up and moved on to a better place. This place isn't exactly Costa del Sol, if you know what I'm saying.”

He just grinned at her arrogantly—and she did not like the way that he looked over her like she was a piece of meat that he wanted to buy—as she went off with her head held high.

“Welcome back, Claire,” Isembard said, “Have you learned aught of import?”
She sighed, feeling disappointed in herself for not finding more information that they could use. Instead, she merely told him what Ungust told her and confirmed it after going to speak with the people.

Isembard didn’t look the least bit surprised by any of this, however, as he sighed, “I see... I apologize. I suppose I should have expected as much from Ungust. Fret not, though, for another thought occurred to me in your absence. The commonfolk are nothing if not fervent in their religious beliefs. Perhaps if they speak freely to their gods, then the clergy may know something of use.”

“Will they be willing to speak about it?” she asked.

“Perhaps,” he said, sounding a little more hopeful. “If we would know what the commonfolk speak of to their gods, we've no better place to ask than at the Church of Saint Adama Landama. It is a small and humble church, found to the northwest of here. And so long as you are headed there, actually...”

He trailed off, but she could see where he was going with this request and she sighed in resignation when he asked, “Might I ask you to deliver the corpses you recovered? A morbid request, I grant you, but they must be borne to burial, and I trust more than you to see it done.”

She really didn’t want to. But she nodded, promising that she would make sure that the bodies were delivered there safely. So, after heading back outside the gates, she took the bodies with her as she began a trek up a ways to where she could just make out the church’s pointed roof. Isembard told her to seek out a man named Marques who tends to the graves in the lichyard and he would be able to tell her where the bodies were to be interred.

Continuing on to the northeast of here, she eventually came up the hill that led to a plateau that overlooked all of Camp Drybone. She followed a long, iron fence as she began to pass a field of gray stones that she quickly realized were full of graves.

Aside from the annoying flies that bit at her as she walked, it was very quiet and peaceful here. There were a few mourners and members of the church members who tended to the graves, but otherwise it was silent.

She searched about for a short time, wondering who this Marques person was. Eventually though, she spotted a man dressed in a dirty cloak and hood overlooking a certain grave and she felt that she should ask. She gently lowered the bodies as she made her way towards the man, taking care to make noise as she approached him so that she didn’t frighten him like she did Tataru earlier. There was something... very skittish and nervous about him—she could sense that even just approaching him.

“Excuse me,” she asked in a soft voice, “Are you Marques?”

Despite her efforts, she still ended up startling him. He turned to look her full in the face and she saw a pair of pale gray eyes looking down at her as if he had never seen anything like her before. She could see that a pair of goggles was settled upon his forehead, his face framed by a full white beard and hair that made him look even older than he was. Despite the white hair though, he did look very young—only a little older than she was. But it where those eyes that were wide and fearful—as if an animal who just realized that a hunter was pointing an arrow at him.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“I am Marques, yes...” he murmured, realizing that she meant him no harm.
She nodded, trying to explain that she had brought bodies that were to be buried here and he tilted his head slightly to look at her. Almost like it took him a few minutes for him to fully understand her words.

“…A body? Of course… There…there have been…so many bodies of late…” he then seemed to quiver at the thought and gave his head a hard shake to clear whatever was going on inside his mind before apologizing, “I… I apologize, miss. If you seek a place of burial, then there are empty graves atop the ridge. Take the path and lay them to rest there.”

“Thank you,” was all she could say as she left him, taking the bodies up the final trek of the wall and laid them to rest at the top of the ridge. It wasn’t easy, but she was glad that she was able to give them a proper burial and hope that they would find the peace they deserved. She stayed long enough to offer prayers that they would know happiness in the next life before she returned to the lichyard, wondering if Marques could tell her anything else.

He barely seemed to notice her as she came up to him. When he did finally see her, he jumped a little before questioning, “Have you finished…?”

She nodded, giving him a grateful smile for his help before. He just sighed however, shaking his own head as he muttered quietly, “May they all walk in Thal’s realm…”

Claire felt bad for pressing him with her questions, but at this point she was willing to ask just about anyone for a lead. So she gently pressed him, “Excuse me, Marques? I was hoping you could help me? I was wondering if you might be able to tell me if you have heard of people going missing of late?”

He jumped at the question, looking frightened at the idea.

“…What? Missing people?” he asked hurriedly, “I…I’m afraid I cannot help you. But maybe Sister Ourcen can.”

“Sister…?” Claire repeated as she saw his eyes become glassy and unfocused. It was a little unnerving as his gaze seemed to be looking right past her as if she were no longer there. “She has been kind to me. Everyone…everyone has been so kind. I don’t know why, though. I…” His faraway gaze suddenly came back into focus as he told her quietly, “Pardon me. You will find Sister Ourcen within the church walls.”

“I… thank you, Marques,” she said, recognizing that now wasn’t the best time to be asking anything else.

Feeling that it was for the best that she left him alone for now, she went into the church. It was small, just one room set up with several pews that were worn-down and creaked with even the tighest touch. There was an elderly man standing at the end of the row of pews, looking about sadly at the few mourners and church members who were also in there.

She bowed her head to the priest, who nodded back graciously at her as she looked around for this Sister Ourcen. A woman suddenly came towards her, asking if she needed help—and as luck would have it, she turned out to be Sister Ourcen.

“I hear you have done us the service of burying some fallen souls. Please accept our gratitude, and extend it to Isembard when you next see him,” she told her kindly.

“Thank you,” Claire said politely, and then explained after having spoken with Marques, she was directed to come here and ask if she knew anything about the missing people in this area. And
when she saw her frown, she knew that she finally found someone who knew exactly what she was talking about.

“You seek knowledge of missing Drybone inhabitants? It is true I am closer to the people than any other of the Order,” she confessed, “I confide in them, and they in me. When they wish to speak to their keeper, Thal, I am the medium through which they do. Should I learn anything pertinent, I will be sure to share the information with you.”

She sighed before adding, “I do apologize, by the way. I only wish Marques would be more helpful in the matter. I pray he did nothing to offend. He saw…terrible things during the Calamity… His scars run deep. Indeed, he seems to now prefer the company of the dead over the living.”

“I see,” Claire said, “It’s alright though.”

“But while tragic, I fear such behavior ill befits the church. I received word not long ago that one of our recent visitors — a man called Thancred, I believe — took offense at his conduct. I must have words with Marques, and soon,” Claire’s ears perked up at the mention of Thancred’s name, but she felt herself frown a little at this revelation. That seemed very much unlike Thancred. Sure, she only just met him, but he didn’t seem the type of man who would take offense of someone harmless like Marques.

She couldn’t focus on that though, instead she thanked the sister before she returned to Isembard—who was still waiting for her. When she came to him, he thanked her for taking the time to see to the burial as well as asked what she learnt. She could not give much information that they didn’t already know though, telling him that all they could do now was wait and see.

“Ah, you’ve been keeping yourself rather busy of late, haven’t you, Claire?”

She looked up at once to see Thancred waving as he came strolling to them; a grin on his face. He gave a bow to Isembard as he told him graciously, “A pleasure, Isembard. The name is Thancred, and I share a passion with you and our mutual friend here for learning what has become of these missing persons and why.”

Without giving Isembard time to answer, he looked to her and added, “I, too, spoke with Ungust—more times than I care to count.”

Then he had her sympathies. She could not imagine having to deal with a worm like him more than once. She saw her look of distaste and he smirked a little at that as he told her, “There seems to be some truth to this notion of the commonfolk speaking their secrets only to those in service to the gods.”

So where was he going with this?

He became thoughtful as he then began to ask, “Prostration, prayer, penance. Abject deeds done behind closed doors, away from prying eyes. Who better to take the pious unawares than she who takes confession— the good Sister Ourcen herself?”

That kind Sister in the church? Was he serious? She wasn’t the only one who shared shock at this theory.

“Ourcen!?” Isembard gasped. “She wouldn’t… She couldn’t!”

"Even the most beautiful roses have thorns, my friend,” Thancred reminded him regretfully. “And you would be wise to keep an eye to this rose.”
She didn’t like that though. Sure, she knew that appearances could be deceiving, but she could not see anything dangerous about Sister Ourcen.

But before she could question his reasons for suspecting Sister Ourcen, she saw him turn away, quietly muttering to himself, “Still, the lichkeeper Marques… I’d swear to the Twelve I’ve seen that face somewhere before…”

With him turned away, Isembard turned to Claire and said, “Sister Ourcen… It cannot be. Though, she is wont to travel to the Golden Bazaar on her own, and it is not uncommon to see her speaking to the children. But… no. It could not be she… could it?”

“We won’t make any accusations without proof,” Claire said, giving Thancred a sharp look, who returned with a sigh.

Perhaps he seemed to take her word as more comforting than Thancred, for he sighed and told her, “I grow weary of these suspicions. I know there is one child in particular that she is fond of. Pray seek out the boy, the two of you, and see if you cannot glean something from him about Ourcen’s activities.”

Claire agreed, and gave Thancred a hard push to get him away from him.

“I apologize for any harm that I may have caused,” Thancred stated, “But I felt that it was best to put him on guard.”

Claire rolled her eyes, knowing that there was no point in arguing about this.

“Where is this Golden Bazaar?” she asked instead.

“Ah, you, my fair lady, couldn’t ask for a more reliable guide!” he said, bowing to her. “Come, let us walk. ’Tis not terribly far from here.”

Thancred, she quickly learned, was a man who enjoyed listening to his voice. At least, that was the impression she got off him as they walked along the dusty path that took them north to where the Golden Bazaar. In all honesty, he was as good as any tour guide was as he began to point out the different locations and landmarks around them so that she could be sure not to get lost. She found that she was actually enjoying his company as they neared the entrance to the Golden Bazaar.

“Alright,” he said, “Let us split up and see what we can find. I’m not sure how open children can be, but I usually find that they can be brutally honest.”

“You don’t like children?” Claire questioned curiously.

“It’s not that I don’t like them… they’re just… not the kind of people I’m used to dealing with,” he confessed. “I find them rather… demanding.”

Not a family man then.

She smirked as she began to search all over this poverty filled bazaar. She couldn’t see why it was called the Golden Bazaar when it looked like the most prosperous thing were the cracked pots that could hold even a little bit of water. However, she soon found the child that she was looking for, playing with a group of other urchins—at least—she thought that they were playing. Instead, when he saw her, he quickly ran to her and began to beg that she help Sister Ourcen, who went out on her own and hadn’t come back. He explained that he lost something and that she went looking for it… but now was afraid that monsters may have attacked her and that was why she was taking so long.
Worried, she promised that she would go out and find her. She feared that the reason she hadn’t come back was because of the kidnapping plots—if she really did have something to do with them. But she was still holding out hope that she could prove Thancred wrong. She didn’t even stop to find Thancred, knowing that time was of the essence now.

She went out in the direction the boy had pointed too earlier—the northeastern part of the Bazaar where she quickly stumbled upon Sister Ourcen in a crumpled mess, curled up near a cliff… and surrounded by beasts. She let out a terrified scream as Claire rushed in and blocked the attacks before quickly finishing them off. Slightly breathless from the sprint, she quickly knelt down at her side, asking if she was alright.

Sister Ourcen cracked an eye open and stared at her in shock.

“You…you are the one from the church,” she whispered before looking over the dead monsters at their feet and let out a shaky gasp of gratitude. “Thank goodness you arrived when you did…it seems my gratitude is yours yet again.”

Claire helped her to her feet, who was now shaking with relief to still be alive.

“You spoke with the child, did you?” Sister Ourcen asked with a knowing look in her eyes, “I was…able to find his lost trinket. It is a ring given to him by his mother before she passed. I will… see it safely back to him.”

She tried to take a step, but her legs couldn’t seem to hold her weight—whether it be from injuries or from shock. Claire reached out to steady her, offering to help take her back to the Bazaar and get her some help when she heard someone calling out her name.

She turned to see that Thancred was running towards them, looking a little paler until he saw them both alive and well. After explaining what happened, Thancred immediately took charge and insisted that he would be the one to take her back to Camp Drybone to get her treated. Meanwhile, Sister Ourcen handed the ring to Claire, asking humbly to return it to the boy, with a reminder to be more careful with it from now on.

After promising that she would, Sister Ourcen took her hand and squeezed it gratefully before allowing Thancred to support her away.

The children were thrilled to find out that Sister Ourcen was safe and that she was going to make a full recovery. The boy was looking upset that she had gotten hurt on account of his ring.

“Just make sure not to lose it again,” Claire told him sympathetically as she dropped the old ring into the palm of his hand. “I promise I’ll tell her that you’re all wishing she gets better soon.”

She then left after that, returning to Camp Drybone—a little surprised to find Thancred speaking with Isembard on the matter. When she appeared at their side, Isembard was looking at her in worry and questioned, “Your companion told me Sister Ourcen was attacked outside the Golden Bazaar. Gods forfend… I will secure a room at the inn for her as soon as possible.”

“I already have, friend,” Thancred muttered, now looking a little embarrassed as he added, “It seems my suspicions about the poor rose were misplaced.”

Isembard couldn’t help but look a little smug at that as he stated, “Indeed they were. I shall see to her as soon as I am able.”

Claire watched him as he hurried off, to make sure that Sister Ourcen was going to be alright, leaving her alone with Thancred.
“False though my suspicions were, perhaps they were not entirely without merit,” Thancred stated, causing Claire to look at him in confusion. He better not be blaming someone else without proof again.

“Whilst returning Sister Ourcen to Camp Drybone, a band of Amalj’aa caught my eye,” he explained to her quietly so that no one could hear them. “I recall which way they were headed, so I believe it would be in our best interests to investigate. Do you not agree?”

Well, that sounded like something interesting and nodded as he led the way out of the settlement once again. This time, they headed more to the southeast, where he explained that there was a small Amalj’aa encampment tucked away here.

“You still want to be careful around them,” he warned her, “While they aren’t as strong or as dangerous as the Amalj’aa in Southern Thanalan, they can still easily cause enough trouble for us here.”

They took a trail that led further into a canyon, where she could see makeshift metal blockades and spiked gates that looked like they could accidently impale someone just by touching them.

Thancred grabbed her hand and pulled her back behind some boulders as they watched one of the lumbering creatures glance around. Now that she was closer, she could get a better look at them.

The Amalj’aa are tall with a muscular physique, powerful arms that looked like they could crush her head with a single hand. The tails they had were small in comparison with the rest of their bodies, with a massive crushed-looking faces and dark eyes that glared about for anything that so much as moved. They looked a lot like fire drakes that had been taught to walk up on their back legs and their arms had grown out.

Thancred believed that there may be some sort of clue to the kidnappings inside their camp. Though, she couldn’t say she was happy that he was the one who suggested that she be the one to take a look inside. After giving him a nasty look, she slipped inside, creeping as close as she could to the canyon wall so as not to be spotted by the hulking lizardmen. As she crept around though, she soon found herself caught between two Amalj’aa—both of them coming down one end of the only path. Without pausing to think, she ducked behind some wooden crates and waited there until the two passed. While she was confident that she could handle them both, she did not want to risk the entire encampment coming to investigate. She could handle two or three… but a dozen or so attacking at once?

She breathed a sigh of relief as she saw them leave, their patrols taking them elsewhere. She was starting to think that there wasn’t anything else here though—no signs of kidnapped victims or anything else that would incriminate them… at least until she looked down at the crates she hide behind. There were a few strange, colored leaflets that looked out of place and she couldn’t help but examine it. Immediately, she realized that the language was written in the common Eorzean tongue... though what she read here quickly got her attention.

Deciding to show Thancred, she rolled it up and tucked it into her bag as she scurried out of the encampment as quickly as she could.

He was there waiting for her under the tree that she left him, and when she paused for breath, he asked, “Well? Did anything tickle your fancy?”

She showed him what she found, and she could see his eyebrows rising at the sight of it.

"This leaflet… ‘See the wealth of Nald to the hands of your children.’ It looks to be some sort of
assembly to provide the poor with work,” he said slowly, “The lettering, though… Atrocious, is it not? And these bits about Nald’thal seem somewhat…less than studied. I find it hard to believe one among the Order penned this.”

He frowned before deciding, “Pray let us take this to the inn at Camp Drybone. We shall see what Sister Ourcen makes of it.”

So the two of them quickly made their way back to Camp Drybone, not speaking to each other at all as they ran. Claire felt that they were starting to put things together… at least they were stringing the pieces together… but they didn’t have enough to keep the pieces in place. Hopefully, Sister Ourcen would be able to shed some light to what this was about. Thancred led her to a small inn, where Sister Ourcen was resting—already looking much better than she was before.

At the sight of the pair of them, Sister Ourcen beamed at them, speaking brightly, “My saviors come again. To what do I owe the honor this day?”

Thancred bowed gave a low bow to her, possibly still feeling a little guilty about having accused her of being behind the kidnappings.

“Ah, my dear sister. It is good to see you well,” he told her ever so politely, “We were hoping you may be able to give us some insight unto this strange leaflet we’ve discovered.”

He showed her the leaflet that they found, which she looked over it with a mixture of emotions. What started off as polite curiosity, soon turned to confusion, then to disbelief, and then a frown of quiet outrage.

“What is this?” she asked, frowning at him, “Blasphemous… These are not our teachings at all! This was not made by any true brother or sister of the Order—of that, I can assure you.”

She paused, there, as if thinking of something else, and then admitted, “Come to think of it, weeks ago, the church was plagued by missing garments. Could someone be posing as a priest of the Order to deceive the people?”

Claire looked to Thancred, who gazed back with excitement in his eyes at this breakthrough and said, “The plot thickens, Claire! Our culprit pretends to be a priest to lend credence to his deception. There is no doubt an irony in there somewhere.”

Oh, she didn’t need him to tell her that.

“But I suspect we have a worthy adversary on our hands,” Thancred couldn’t help but muse over, “I shall consider how best to handle this. For now, my dear, go tell Isembard what we have learned here. I shall be along once I’ve divined our next step.”

She didn’t see any other reason for staying around here as she hurried back to Isembard to tell him all that happened.

“Posing as a priest? To think…” Isembard said in horror at the thought that there was a monster hiding among them at this very moment. He shook his head as he tried to find some good news in all this, “These troubling notions aside, it is gratifying to finally be able to move this investigation forward. Thank you once again, Claire. I shall keep my ears and eyes open—now more than ever.”

“Do you suspect anyone here who would do something like this?” Claire asked him. “Someone suspicious…?”

He let out a heavy sigh as he rubbed the back of his neck in a lost way. “There has been no unusual
activity of late, and none at this camp have given me cause to doubt them,” he admitted, “But unless we can identify the culprit, and soon, more innocents will fall victim…”

So they were back to square one then? It felt as though they were running out of options. She really didn’t want to have to return to the Waking Sands admitting failure in figuring out who was behind these kidnappings.

“Do not despair just yet, my friend,” Thanred’s voice said, getting both of their attention. Thancred was grinning as he stopped in front of them and offered, “An idea occurs to me.”

“Oh no,” she could not help but say and his eyes seemed to twinkle in amusement as he suggested, “Our suspect has been posing as a priest, using leaflets bearing false promises to lure the poor. Let Claire and me serve like with like by posing as impoverished souls in need of succor.”

Ah, now here was an idea. If they were targeting refugees, it makes sense why they would avoid people like them. Perhaps the fact that the pair of them were carrying weapons was what was putting the kidnappers off.

Isembard thought their scheme over before nodding, muttering to himself, “Aye, a clever idea indeed. I dare to hope that this will yield us the answers we seek. It will be a dangerous undertaking, but you two are more than capable of looking after yourselves.”

He looked from Thancred, to her, and then nodded, looking a little more confident.

“I’m next to useless in a battle, but I can supply the garments for the disguise,” he offered, quickly hurrying off. They waited for a few minutes before he returned, carrying some clothes in his arms and held out a pair for both.

“These old tunics and slops should serve your needs, so long as you don’t mind the smell and the stains,” he told them as she began to look over her own pair. They weren’t pretty, but she knew that they would do.

Thancred was looking a little offended at the dirty clothes, which cause her to smirk slightly as he looked over the cloth sadly.

“These will serve very well,” he said to Isembard, “You have my thanks.”

Claire nodded as she took her own worn clothes and looked over them—seeing that she had seen better cloth made into rags. They certainly smelled—like sweat and musk—and it made her eyes water just breathing them in. But she had been in dungeons that were much worse.

“Listen, Claire. So as to lay the foundation for our little ploy, we must make it widely known that more vagrants have arrived at camp and are desperate for coin,” Thancred said to her, “To this end, we must don the old garments Isembard has lent us, and beg for work around the camp. Before long, the false priest should catch wind and approach us.”

Sounded simple enough. He then took her to a small alleyway where they could change without anyone noticing.

“What are you doing?” she demanded as he showed no signs of embarrassment as he pulled his tunic off, revealing a bare chest.

“Changing,” he said, giving her a little wink. “You are welcome to watch, my dear.”

“Yda told me that if you tried anything I was permitted to hit you,” she warned and he laughed as
he held up his hands.

“Now, now… there is no need to resort to violence. I was simplest jesting,” he promised her, “But all jesting aside, I swear that I will not look when you change. I will be long gone and making myself a nuisance to the good people here in Camp Drybone by the time you come out, my lady. Now, to make sure that we meet up again later, when you are done, simply meet me with Isembard at the well.”

She nodded and turned around, not having the desire to see him stripped down in front of her.

“I assure you,” he said, her back still to him as she heard him drop his belt and her own face was turning red at the thought, “I mean no offense. But we must turn our matters to the kidnapped victims and oftentimes we don’t have time for even the littlest of things.”

“You’ve been with the Scions for long?” she asked curiously.

“Longer than some,” he confessed. “I was the first to join with Minfilia when she asked me. When she did, I could not say no. That was when I was still part of the Circle of Knowing.”

“Hmm?”

“Oh, I apologize, you wouldn’t know about that,” he said, “But you see, before the Calamity, Minfilia was the leader of an organization called the Path of the Twelve. An organization of people who were touched by the Echo. They were dedicated to supporting and protecting those who, like you, have the gift of the Echo. Meanwhile, I, along with Y’shtola, Yda, Papalymo, and Urianger were all part of another group called the Circle of Knowing.”

“And the Circle of Knowing is…?” she asked, truly curious now.

“We Archons,” he answered simply. “You’ve undoubtedly have seen the tattoos on our necks? Those are proof that we studied in the city-state of Sharlayan and completed our education there. We are devoted to building a lasting peace within Eorzea as a whole. Un-Unfortunately, we lost our leader in the Calamity. And many Echo users from the Path of the Twelve were also lost.”

“I’m sorry,” Claire told him, having picked up on the slight catch in his voice when he mentioned the loss of their leader.

“Don’t worry,” he said, though his tone clearly said otherwise. “We are making it work somehow. I just need to work harder now than I used to. But we were struggling without a leader, and Minfilia was left almost alone. So… after getting together, we decided to combine what remained of the two groups and became the Scions of the Seventh Dawn. She was very hesitant at first in accepting the role of leader, as I’m sure you can imagine. At first, she believed that a strong leader would include someone who can fight or one of us Archons.”

“So she is not an Archon?” Claire questioned.

“No, but she remained in close contact with our leader for years before he died.” Thancred said. “While she is not a warrior or an Archon, I believe that she has done a fine job so far.”

“You sound close?” she said and she heard him chuckle.

“She is a dear thing to me,” he confessed when she heard more rustling of fabric, “N-Not in that sort of way, mind you. But she is a treasured friend. It’s only natural, I suppose. I’ve known her ever since she was a young child, you see, and I have always done my best to keep an eye on her while she was growing up. So, it is my job to make sure that she always has a helping hand.”
He fell silent for a moment before she heard a clatter of metal and he said, “Alright, you can look.”

She turned back to see him standing there in those dirty rags and looking over himself.

“Not truly fit for a man of refinement,” he sighed, “But they should do for now.”

She wasn’t sure about that. He still stood out like a sore thumb with his white hair and tattooed neck. She watched as he ran a thumb along a small knife and tucked it at his side before turning to her. “You best change as well,” he said to her, “Don’t worry, I will make sure that no one comes down this alley while you do. I’ll meet you at the well.”

She nodded as he left, leaving her the undesirable task of changing into rags. Wanting to get this over with, she changed quickly and made sure to tuck her weapons, accessories, and her gear into her sack before she came out. Almost at once, she saw how differently she was treated compared to before. People were always willing to ask an adventurer for aid because they weren’t afraid to take on the dirtier tasks, get paid a quick sum, and then went on their way. But the moment that the residents and merchants thought that she was just another starving refugee, they barely gave her a second glance. In truth, many of them weren’t shy about showing her dislike and often rude to her pleas for work and brushed her aside as if she weren’t there.

Yet, after her many inquiries around the town, she did get some news of another camp out by a pond to the north of here. That seemed a promising place as any to look into. When she finally had enough with the coldness of the people here, she returned to the well where she spotted Thancred already there and waiting for her.

He greeted her in a friendly way—which was much appreciated after being dismissed so many times—and told her, “You have quite a knack for being a nuisance, Claire. The camp is abuzz with talk of newly arrived vagrants.”

She nodded and told him what she learned, which he seemed to have found out as well. He gazed around at the people here before stating, “And though we were unable to attract our wayward transgressor, we were able to learn that the poor have a commune by the pond north of Sandgate, to the east of here, were we not?”

“So what do you think?” she asked.

“The eyes of the authorities do not reach that place—rather ideal for spiriting away hapless souls,” he stated, “Let us go there and wait for the kindly priest to come and offer us aid and comfort. Needless to say, we’ll need to remain in disguise.”

So, they set off together across the sands to find this camp that the people spoke of—after Thancred made a show of swearing at the people here for their ‘heartless’ attitude to poor unfortunate souls like them.

She was fighting the urge to laugh as she dragged him away.

“Now word will spread about the refugees heading out in the direction of the camp,” he reasoned as they walked on. “Hopefully, this priest will take the bait.”

They soon found the spot that was mentioned. A tiny camp alright… though calling it a camp would probably be considered kind at this point. There was a small tent set up with a few pieces of cooking utensils and old bottles around… but that was about it.

“It doesn’t look like anyone else is around,” she reasoned as she nudged the dirty pot with a sandaled foot.
“No,” Thancred agreed, also looking around with a frown. “It looks like no one has been around here for a couple of days at least. That’s good though. This would look all too easy for a kidnapper.”

He then took a handful of mud from the pond and added some to his neck in an attempt to cover up the tattoos, or at least make them a little less noticeable.

“While I doubt that the kidnapper would recognize their meaning,” he added to her when the two of them sat down and she watched how he cleaned his hands on the borrowed clothes to make them look even more woebegone, “Better not to take any chances.”

He then looked up to the clear sky and Claire reasoned that it must be late in the afternoon at this point. Hopefully they would find this priest before it got dark, she noticed how cold it got in this reason at night.

“A fine day for catching false priests, wouldn’t you say,” he asked her, making sure to tuck his knife into his belt, “All that’s left, then, is to wait for our quarry to appear.”

There wasn’t much else to do but pretend to be a pair of lost souls who had nothing left and nowhere to go. But Thancred was more than happy to also entertain her with some classic songs that the bards sing. He was certainly one who enjoyed being at the center of attention; truly, he seemed to thrive in it.

“Are there many other members of the Scions?” she asked curiously. “Aside from you, Y’shtola and the others?”

“Oh, a few,” he confessed, looking through one of the bottles he found and was disappointed to see that there was no drink in them. “We have to be careful about who we let into the organization because not all can be trusted. And we do try to stay secret for the most part. Makes things easier that way on us if not everyone knows, you see. But we have been gradually adding to our number, especially over the last couple of years. The ones you met today are the senior members of the Scions, the members who have been in the organization the longest, anyway. But we have around a dozen or so others. And that’s not including the many contacts, allies, and friends that we have all over Eorzea and in Sharlayan.”

“So… why was I offered an invitation?” she asked, wondering that all day.

“We’re always on the lookout for others. And because Y’shtola has always had a keen eye for talent,” he smiled kindly. “Believe me, it had taken me years to impress her. And that wasn’t through sweet, honeyed words either. But I have always trusted her judgement, and if you are half the good person that she says you are, then we are much better for your aid.”

He chuckled when he saw her turning red at the praise.

“So, you don’t have anyone special?” he asked and when she raised an eyebrow at him he held up his hands and said, “Not that I am asking for any other motivation than for good conversation. I am simply curious.”

“No, I don’t,” she confessed, “But don’t get any ideas.”

“None, whatsoever, my lady,” he said graciously. “But, if you’ll forgive me for seeming bold, a lovely, young maiden like yourself? Surely you must have had admirers flocking from all over.”

“You are right, you are bold,” she stated and he chuckled.
“I merely speak the truth,” he said with a tip of his head. “A strong, independent, beautiful woman such as yourself? Why your hair alone I could compare to the color of a blushing bride upon her wedding day… or your eyes like the most sparkling pair of emeralds that a man could ever hope to lay eyes upon.”

“Oh, you are a charmer,” she said and he laughed again as he bowed his head once more.

“Once again, I apologize,” he grinned playfully, “But it’s always a nice change to speak with such a good listener. In truth… I’ve been working so hard these days that I haven’t had good company in some time. So I thank you for that.”

She found that strange. Even though there were so few of their number, surely he could have some aid?

“I can handle it,” he promised, noticing her expression. “Truly. If I cannot pull my own weight around here, then what sort of Scion would I be?”

She looked down at her feet, feeling a little apprehensive about this. Mayhaps he realized what he said for he reached over and patted her shoulder in a kind way.

“Do not worry,” he promised. “It may take a little time to get used to us, but we grow on you.”

“Even if I am not some big educated person like you or the others?” she asked and he grinned again.

“Oh, don’t you worry about that. We all have our talents. I didn’t have the… best start in life,” he confessed. “Just a humble street urchin trying to make his way when an old man saw a promising new start for me. That was where my journey began and I will never forget my humble beginnings.” He cleared his throat and added a little quicker, “My point is, my dear, is that you don’t need to worry. Just help out wherever you can and you will find your place with us in no time. That’s why you were given this small mission of investigation. We’re going to work you up before you are called in to help handle primals.”

That was something else that she had been wanting to discuss. Whatever anyone said, she was still struggling to understand what primals were. She opened her mouth to ask, but paused when she heard footsteps coming in behind her. Thancred clearly heard them too, and could see someone approaching as he looked over her head.

“Looks like he has finally made a move,” he said, all traces of seriousness fading as he stood up, taking her hand and helping her up. “Be ready for anything. I don’t think I saw any weapons on him. In fact, I doubt that he could pull off the role of a man of the cloth if he did carry one. But you never know.”

She nodded as she stood there, trying to look the part of a lost soul once again, moving her hair about her face so that in case he was someone around Camp Drybone and had seen her before. Though… she couldn’t help but think that her pink hair would have given her away by now. Thancred turned around and was staring out at the water, pretending not to notice the footsteps growing louder. Soon though, when Claire turned her head slightly she spotted the cloaked man approaching—dressed in the slightly dirty white of the priest’s robes, similar to the ones that Sister Ourcen was wearing.

“Oh, you poor, unfortunate souls,” he said in a somber voice that Claire didn’t buy for a minute—though it did sound strangely familiar, “This is no way for men to live. No way at all.”
She kept her head down as Thancred turned his head around, and through a marvelous bit of acting, pulled off the perfect air of wariness, annoyance, and even curiosity in his voice as he asked, “Who are you? What do you want?”

The robed man only chuckled slightly as he told him, “Be at ease, child, for I mean you no harm. I am a priest of the Order of Nald’thal, and I come to offer you succor.”

He then pulled out one of the leaflets, identical to the one they found before in the Amalj’aa encampment and handed it to him, stating, “This leaflet bears the teachings of Nald. Trust to them, and they will surely set you free from the shackles of penury!”

Thancred, still putting on the act of interest, took it quickly to look over it. After reading it over, he said, “Hmmm… A tempting offer, but I’m afraid I must decline…”

And when his head jerked up, his eyes were narrowed as he let the act fall like the leaflet he tore up and let flutter to the ground around his feet as he growled out in an outraged voice, “On account of that atrocious performance. You would have made a gods-awful mummer, Ungust!”

Seriously? That jerk was behind this? She turned her head about and got a good look at the face that was still hidden by the shadows of the hood and realized that she could still smell that disgusting booze on his breath.

Ungust gasped in utter shock at hearing his own name and even took a step back as he gasped, “Wh- What!? How did you know—!? Y-you bastards tricked me!”

He looked ready to run, but Thancred’s knife was still clearly seen from his belt and he was even running a thumb over the blade as his arms came to rest at his side. Terrified of being attacked he turned to pleading.

“P-Please don’t hurt me! I was only doing it to protect my people!”

That got her attention as well as Thancred’s, who was now frowning and paused in his anger for a moment. He seemed more curious to hear what he had to say, but there was a great deal of doubtful sarcasm there as he asked coldly, “Is that so? Do continue.”

She was now beginning to see why he seemed so cocky compared to all the other nervous folk in the camp when it came to the kidnappings. He had no fear of being kidnapped. They had the proof that they needed that Ungust had at least a small part to do with the kidnappings in the area. They caught him red-handed, and she was sure that the Immortal Flames would be able to get some answers out of him. Whatever he was going to say, had better be good if he was trying to bargain his way out of trouble.

“V-Very well… I’m a man of the Golden Bazaar. Raised there, if not born,” he said in a new trembling voice that sounded fake to her. As if he had been practicing this speech in the mirror for some time before trying it out on them. “Some moons ago, the Amalj’aa raids began. They would appear sudden as a sandstorm, and plunder and pillage at will. Our defenders couldn’t stand against them, few as they were. Everyone lived in fear. I-I wanted to save my people, but being a merchant was all I knew. And so I did the only thing a merchant could—I approached the Amalj’aa in hopes of brokering a deal. In return for sparing the Golden Bazaar, they made demands—outrageous ones.”

Then why not go to the Immortal Flames or someone else for aid then? She doubted that the Flames would allow something like this to happen in Thanalan if they knew it was going on.
“Demands? Of what kind, pray tell?” Thancred demanded, now so serious that it was as the playful, kind-hearted Thancred was now replaced by someone else entirely.

Ungust was definitely growing nervous by Thancred’s commanding voice and whimpered, “First of all, they wanted the schedule for crystal shipments from the Nanawa Mines. For this, I bribed one of the workers to leak me the information. Next, they wanted me to bring them people. So, I posed as a priest to lure in the vulnerable and give them over to the Amalj’aa.” He gulped hard and mumbled, “I…I didn’t have a choice…”

And what of the people whom turned their trust to him? What was their choice?

Thancred wasn’t buying it either, his eyes now sharp as he stated with bitter ice in his tone, “Protecting one’s home is a noble thing…but at the cost of innocents!? You could have sought the aid of the Immortal Flames, yet you did not. I suspect you are not telling me the full story.”

He then took a step forward, making Ungust jump and slither back farther away, as if afraid that Thancred would strike him at any moment. But Thancred only demanded, “What made you sell out your own people? Speak!”

Ungust took another step backwards and Claire was wondering if he was hoping to get far enough away that he could make a break for it without worrying about Thancred catching him. His arms were suddenly swinging back and forth as he turned his head about, as if searching for someone to help him. But when no one did, he mumbled something under his breath. Which could have been an explanation or group of colorful swearing for all she could make out.

“What did you say?” Thancred’s eyes narrowed, his voice now a cold hiss as he took another step closer, practically towering over the little man who finally confessed.

“The coin was good, I said!” he blurted out, throwing out his arms to stop Thancred from coming any closer. “I could sell mole meat for a score lifetimes and not see even a fraction of what the Amalj’aa pay me!”

Anger suddenly boiled inside her at those words. He was willing to trade innocent people’s lives for coin? Before she could lash out and strike the man, Thancred began to snarl at Ungust, “You sacrificed innocents so that you could line your own pockets!? Words fail to express the contempt I feel for you!”

Well said.

The best part though was when Ungust tried to back away, really looking like he was about to make a run for it. With all his attention focused on Thancred, he didn’t even notice when she stepped behind him, crossing her arms and glaring at him to make sure he didn’t move any further. Wearing a long cloak like that while trying to make a run for it? She could catch him easily in a full sprint.

“But spare me your contempt!” Ungust snapped back, though he sounded as scared and pathetic when she had called him out earlier that day when he knew that he wasn’t going to bothering that woman again. Come to think of it… perhaps that was why he was so keen to have that woman… to sell her off to the Amalj’aa. She could only say that she was glad when she stepped in when she did.

“If you want to blame someone for the mess the world’s in, then blame yourselves or the gods!” Ungust yelled before he turned, but letting out a cry of shock and fear when he saw her blocking his path. “Not you again!”
With his only ways of escape now cut off, Thancred grabbed Ungust roughly by the shoulder and shook him hard as he demanded, “Were you the one leaking the Immortal Flames’ patrol routes to the enemy as well? Spit it out!”

“Nooo!” Ungust yowled, struggling to get away. “I know nothing about that! I swear it!”

Oh, why did she doubt that?

Thancred let out a loud snort, not buying it anymore than she was as he kept a firm grasp on their criminal as he spat, “At this stage, I’m disinclined to believe aught that leaves your mouth. But no matter. There’ll be time enough to learn the truth.”

His eyes suddenly caught hold of hers and she saw some of the anger fade, returning to a shadow of the kinder Thancred she spent the better part of the day getting to know.

“Claire?” he asked compassionately. “Be a dear and take word of these developments to Minfilia, would you? I shall prize everything I can out of this filth. The abductees are still out there. Our foremost priority is to rescue them.”

She nodded back in understanding before he grinned at her, only for that grin to fade as he glared at Ungust, all but dragging him away to be questioned. She watched them leave, heading back to Camp Drybone, before she began to change out of her clothes and back into her adventuring attire. Well, she could not say that it wasn’t an interesting first day with the Scions.
Chapter Summary

So we think we have a plan. Wait for them to come to us... but it was a trap and suddenly they were pulled into their trap. Now the newest member of the Scion is up against a battle of fire. Against the Lord of the Inferno himself... she must battle against Ifrit.

Claire soon returned to Vesper Bay to report their progress so far. Tataru was there to greet her at the door with a sunny smile before letting her go through, to where she headed back to the Solar where Minfilia was waiting for her.

At the sound of her entering, Minfilia stood up from the desk, smiling warmly, she said, “Welcome back, Claire. I am pleased that you and Thancred have been getting along.”

Claire shrugged as she told her all that they found out while at Camp Drybone. Minfilia was quiet the whole time as she listened, only nodding, until she finished by explaining how they caught Ungust.

“I see,” Minfilia said solemnly as she let the news sink in. “You have done well to uncover the truth. My thanks for the report. As Thancred said, we must ascertain where the abducted were taken… and none but the Amalj’aa know the answer.”

Easier said than done. But how were those large Amalj’aa able to take so many people in such a short amount of time? Surely someone would have seen? Unless… they had more help than she thought?

“Suffice it to say they will not willingly part with this information,” Minfilia sighed, causing her to forget those thoughts for the moment, “I fear blood will be spilled before all is said and done.”

Her expression still held a lot of grave concern, but she seemed to be trying to hide it as she forced another tired smile and explained, “You’ve done much this day, Claire, and for that you have my thanks again. The Scions and I will see to it that the Flames receive our intelligence, and we will decide what to do from there.”

Claire nodded as she went to get some food, which she hadn’t had much of for the last few days. She found an inn in Vesper Bay that served some pretty good home-cooked meals and she swallowed every mouthful gratefully. By the time that she finished and returned to Minfilia, things were already underway.

After Minfilia greeted her, she told her urgently, “Word has arrived from Thancred concerning our ongoing investigation. It appears he was able to extract information from our friend Ungust, the false priest. He revealed that he is due to meet with the Amalj’aa to discuss their dealings. The Immortal Flames believe that the meeting will present an ideal opportunity to capture the Amalj’a responsible for the abductions, and so they mean to have Ungust attend as planned.”

So they were going to be using Ungust as part of an ambush; good… make him sweat a little.
“As the Amalj’aa are anticipated to offer fierce resistance, the Immortal Flames have requested our support,” Minfilia added, “I would have you provide it to them, Claire. Thancred is presently attending to another matter, but will join you as soon as he was able. Until such time as he does, you will be the Scions’ sole representative on the ground.”

Really? Once again, they sure weren’t shy about putting her to work, were they?

“Before he left, he bade me tell you to ‘save some for him’,” Minfilia laughed, “Such is his confidence in you—a confidence I share.”

“Alright,” Claire chuckled in agreement as Minfilia beamed and informed her to report back to Camp Drybone. Once there, she was to report to the Flame Sergeant who would be leading the mission.

The journey back to Camp Drybone was very quick, for she now had the pleasure of teleporting right into the heart of the camp. Soon enough, she was able to track down the group of Flames who were getting ready for this next battle. She found the sergeant, at least she found the one who was barking orders at the others, and reported to him—whom sprang into a salute when he saw her.

“Ah, you’re Claire Faye of the Scions, then? My thanks for coming, friend. We’re stronger for your assistance,” he said as he continued on brusquely, “Allow me to brief you on our mission. Our objective is to capture Amalj’aa and prize from them the whereabouts of the abductees. The lizardmen aren’t aware that their man, Ungust, has been exposed. When they come to the rendezvous point to meet the traitor, we’ll spring the trap. Owing to the clandestine nature of the mission, we can only deploy a small contingent. Every member must count, and so we requested the aid of the Scions. The rendezvous will take place at the Invisible City, just nearby the Golden Bazaar. Please make your way there and lie in wait, and we’ll be along shortly. We stand to learn much and more of the Amalj’aa plot if the mission succeeds, Claire. Let’s make sure it does.”

She nodded, having a vague idea to where the Invisible City was. They were a bunch of crumbling old ruins that were crawling with imps and who knows what else. Thancred mentioned it to her when they first travelled to the Golden Bazaar, and so she already had the place marked on her map. The sergeant saluted one final time before he hurried off, leaving her to continue on foot for the rest of the way.

Eventually, she met up with a Flame Private, who was crouching behind some of the rubble, and waved her over. They all laid in wait as the others got into position and from her hiding place, she saw Ungust being shoved out, looking ruffled and highly uncomfortably, and stumbled to the middle of the meeting spot.

“We make our move as soon as the Amalj’aa appear,” whispered the sergeant to her as they remained crouched down, their weapons at hand, and ready to spring out as soon as the ‘guests’ arrived.

They only had to wait a short time for a trio of Amalj’aa came out from deeper in the ruins, heading straight for Ungust, who immediately began to speak with them. The Sergeant was done with waiting and he was the first to leap up as she joined the other Flames so that they surrounded both Ungust and the Amalj’aa.

“What is the meaning of this!?” one of the Amalj’aa roared out in a deep and raspy voice. She and the others drew their weapons, but she could feel that there was something… something not right here. She wasn’t the only one, for one of the privates called out in warning that something was amiss. But it was too late at that point. Another group of Amalj’aa, far more than anyone though, came bursting out of nowhere, quickly surrounding them all. Meanwhile, Ungust, began to grin and
laugh.

Even before she saw that grin she knew that they had been set up. She drew her axe just as, to her utter horror, one of the Flame soldiers was laughing along with Ungust.

“I’m afraid your little ambush ends here!” he called with a rather stupid grin.

“I eluded the Immortal Flames’ capture for moons before finally being caught,” Ungust called almost childishly, “Did you not wonder how I managed it?”

Claire shook her head in disgust, privately thinking that if they ever made it out of this mess alive, she as going to deal with both these traitors. Speaking of traitors, the false solider was grinning as he gestured to himself proudly, “’Twas almost as if someone was feedin’ him information from the inside!”

The Flame Sergeant couldn’t have looked more furious at this news as Ungust finished gleefully, “Aye. Your every movement was known to me ahead of time!”

Well, at least they now knew how they were able to pull this off. But they had to focus on that later seeing how the horde of Amalj’aa charged at them. It was chaos after that moment, with her forcing to duck around the many bodies that were flying about the place. She could feel the others fighting more than actually seeing it all. She was focusing on as many Amalj’aa as possible—but every time she took one down, more would come charging at her.

She was gritting her teeth in frustration as some were certainly more stubborn than others and she felt that she was getting nowhere even with all the lizardmen she cut down. There were just too many of them and she began to feel that falling back was their best option. But by the time she turned to the others, she realize that there were hardly any Flames still standing, having lost and held down by Amalj’aa, who were still flooding in.

She was panting hard as she glared at the beastmen who surrounded her; wondering what she could do but nothing was coming to mind.

“Put up your weapon, or your comrade’s a dead man!”

She spun around to see the traitorous soldier holding his blade at the throat of one of the privates, in intention all too clear. She paused there, her mind torn. She knew that she was all but on her own and she couldn’t hope to fight off such numbers in time. But if she lowered her weapon then they would all be taken anyway…?

Still, she felt her body slowly lowering her weapon before the private’s eyes widened in shock and he cried out in warning, “Look behind you!”

Claire whipped around too late, for one of the Amalj’aa cast a spell towards her and hit her full in the face. At once she felt exhaustion enter her body and her mind clouded. She staggered, feeling her heavy axe drop from her limp fingers as she fell to her knees and then onto her back. Her vision was quickly fading as sleep was taking hold… the last thing she heard was Ungust’s voice ordering the Amalj’aa to bring her and the captured soldiers with them…and then she knew nothing else.

Claire could never be sure how long she had been out. Only remembering waking up in a dark cave with a massive headache and every part of her body aching. Thick ropes were tied around her wrists and she could feel them cutting into her skin as she struggled to sit up—trying to remember what happened. She could see that she was far from alone though; she was surrounded by Flame soldiers and a small crowd of commonfolk—the kidnapped people it would seem. They were all
lying scattered about the cave like how she was.

“Hey…”

She looked up to see that it was the Sergeant—tied up just like how she was.

“Are you alright?” he asked urgently. She nodded, staring around as she tried to piece her memory together on what just happened.

“I was…?” she began and he sighed, informing her that she was struck by a sleeping spell. They knocked her out because as much as the Amal’ja wanted as many kidnapped victims as possible, they didn’t feel right about letting such a loose cannon be dragged here while awake.

“I fear the Amal’ja mean to give us to their god as an offering,” he said, the quiver in his voice clear despite the bravery he tried to put on, “Damn… If I must die, then let me die a soldier’s death—with steel in hand!”

“What do you mean as an offering?” she asked quietly, “What are they going to do to us?”

Before he could answer, several Amal’ja entered, and the people all scooted as far away as possible from them. They only laughed as they grabbed them all, one-by-one, and forced out of the cave. Claire was roughly pulled to her feet and one of the last to be brought out. The one good thing was that now that she was defenseless, they didn’t feel the need to keep them bound, and he cut her ropes. But she barely had time to rub her wrists as she was pushed towards the cave’s entrance.

As soon as she was outside again, she thought that it had fallen dark… but when she looked up, she saw that there was something not right about the sky. This darkness did not feel right to her and she stared up to realize that the sun was completely eclipsed. She gulped down her fear, still not understanding what was going to happen… though her fear only grew when the large crowd of Amal’ja began to chant in deep voices.

“Lord of the Inferno, hearken to our plea! Lord of the Inferno, deliver us from our misery!”

The largest Amal’ja, practically draped in beads and scarves, stepped forward with a horned staff, and practically worshiping the eclipsed sun.

“O mighty Ifrit, Lord of the Inferno!” he called, “Your humble servants beseech you! Grace us with Your divine presence!”

Before her wide eyes, she saw something burning in the sky. It appeared to be a small burning orb… but it quickly grew in size, almost as big as the sun as roaring filled her ears and the flames grew more powerful. She could feel it as something began to stir from within the fire. Nothing could tear her eyes away from the heavens, even when she heard the feeble cries of Ungust and the traitor soldier—who were both being offered up beside them.

From out of the inferno burst a massive beast, horned and monstrous, leaping from above to land in front of them as fire erupted about them. Its body was reptilian in appearance and was aglow with embers, as if the thick scales that covered its body were nothing more than cracked crust and magma flowed through its veins instead of blood. A pair of enormous horns curled around its head as it turned its face down to look at them, and it’s great, glowing eyes opened to look down at its pray.

“O mighty Ifrit!” the priest bellowed out to the darken sky. “We bring before you ignorant savages who know not Your godhead! If it please You, Lord, scorch their heathen souls with Your
Everyone around her began to cry and looked on in panic. It was all that she could do to keep her own fears bottled up—knowing that losing her head now wasn’t going to help her or anyone else. She could only stare up at the creature that towered over them, unable to tear her gaze away from those blazing eyes that seemed to be staring right into her very soul and felt the ground beneath her tremble with every step that it took.

It was here that she realized that their Lord of the Inferno had a voice.

“Pitiful children of man! By my breath I claim you! Arise once more as my loyal minions! Feed my flames with your faith, and all who stand against us shall burn!”

The voice sounded like the crackling flames that burned around them, a guttural howl that hurt her ears and radiate with heat as he reared his head back and let out a roar. That was also when it opened his mouth and bright blue flames shot of it and headed straight towards them. She stared on with wide eyes as the flames reached them and she closed her eyes, covering her face to try and protect herself, even though she knew that these flames would likely kill them all.

She could feel it alright… the burning pain of the fire washing over her body, where she blistered at the touch… but it was not as hot, nor as painful as she expected it to be. And as quickly as the flames came, they were gone. She slowly cracked her eyes open to realize that she wasn’t just some pile of ashes on the ground… nor was she in any worse pain than before. With her heart still beating, her blood rushing, she looked down at her body to see that nothing had changed… not even her clothes had a single burn in them…?

How was that possible?

She stared at her hands, not seeing anything wrong… aside from the marks around her wrists—from where the rope burns that she had been tied with earlier as they dragged her here—she was perfectly unscathed.

“My lord Ifrit!”

She turned to see that the soldiers and other kidnapped victims were all alive as well. But there was something wrong. Their eyes were glazed over and unfocused as they reached their hands out to Ifrit, as if longing to touch him. They then began to moan and cry out praises to Ifrit as their lord and savior, none of them looking the least bit afraid any longer.

What was wrong with them?

The Amalj’aa were all wondering the same thing. However… they were looking at her as if her behavior was suddenly the one that wasn’t acting normal. She could see that all the Amalj’aa were staring at her with shock, and then began to hiss in rage. Especially the Amalj’aa priest, who bellowed out, “Impossible! By what sorcery do you resist my master’s will!?”

She did not answer as she looked about her, her courage rising, her blood all but singing at the fight that was sure to come. Her eyes fell upon the Amalj’aa who was holding all the confiscated weapons and spotted her own axe among them. She ignored all the others around her as they many were now backing away from her, as if she was some sort of terrifying monster rather than the beast that now stood before them.

“What is your soul already belongs to Another!? Yes, that is the only explanation!”
Rather than answer, she turned her attention to the Amal’aa who held the weapons—he ended up accidentally dropping them all when he heard his ‘lord’ speak. She snatched up her axe and glared up at Ifrit, certain that what she was about to do was stupid and reckless, but it was all she had left going for her.

At the sight of her daring to defy him, Ifrit roared out in fury, causing all the Amal’aa to back away immediately, terror in their faces. But she focused only on the god in front of her, barely even noticing the ring of flames that roared to life around them. She just marched forward, ready to go down fighting.

“Forsooth, thy frail mortal frame can serve as vessel to the blessing of but One. Yet I smell not the taint of Another upon thee…” Ifrit said before it roared out once more, where she could feel the heat lick her face as she moved back slight to avoid the burn.

“The truth of thine allegiance waxeth clear— thou art of the godless blessed’s number,” Ifrit said, “The Paragons warned of thine abhorrent kind. Thine existence is not to be suffered.”

She honestly had no idea of what he was saying, but it didn’t matter, she just swung out her axe and caught its massive claw as it came swiping at her. And so another battle began as she moved about the raging flames, trapped in a cage of fire with this god of fire. She didn’t think that she was going to walk out of this mess alive, but if this was to be her last battle, she was going to make it count by taking it down with her. She began to move, almost dance about Ifrit as he continued to roar out with fire as he swiped his claws in her direction.

She was forced to continue to dodge the worst of his fires as he caused the ground to crack and burn beneath her feet. She had to keep stepping about, making sure that she never stood in one place for longer than a few seconds. She could feel the fire searing her arms, feel the smoke filling her lungs, the roars of the god that deafened her ears. Now that she knew what a primal was, she was starting to regret ever asking.

Still, there would be time to worry about that later—hopefully.

She could only continue to do what she could in moving and dodging as the fires scorched her skin and feel how her axe burned beneath her fingertips every time she rammed the blade into the god’s chest.

It was almost like a dance between the two of them, she was dancing with this creature of fire and it was impossible to say who was taking the lead here. For every second that did pass, she could see Ifrit growing more desperate and angry as her own confidence and will grew. At one point, he jumped up high above her before landing in the flames that surrounded the battlefield and she knew what was coming. Sheducked and rolled as he charged a path right at her. She rolled out of the way in time, though judging from the smell, the tips of her hair were scorched off.

Ifrit bellowed out, “My flames shall consume thy flesh and soul both! Succumb to the inferno!”

But she was up and ready by the time Ifrit turned and roared once more, an eruption of fire burning all about her as she struggled to hold on. The wooden handle of the axe was quickly splintering and the axe head was melting from the flames, but she still charged in with it as a flaming nail came down and rammed itself into the ground like an arrow. She could feel power coming from it, growing stronger and stronger, realizing almost too late that this thing was charging Ifrit’s next attack. She turned her full attention to getting rid of it before it could finish. With luck, she managed to cause the nail and all the aether it gathered to dispense, letting her turn her attention back to Ifrit.
“Surrender thyself to the fires of judgment!” Ifrit roared, approaching her as she struggled to move her aching body at this point, in terrible pain from the burns, “Thy soul shall burn for eternity!”

Like hells she was going down like this… so she ran straight for him once more—going for her goal all along. She had been slashing at its chest like that over and over, trying to break through the thick scales to reach its heart and she could see that she was just about through. With a battle cry, she put everything she had left into this last attack—knowing that it was going to end one of them. It was with a sickening CRACK did she rammed the blade through its chest and reached the fiery heart that burned within.

That seemed to have finally been too much for Ifrit though, for he was now roaring out in pain and agony, its head rolling back violently as it screamed.

“The blessing of Light…defies me!?” it hollered as Claire turned and ducked as the fire burned and spluttered like the end of a roaring campfire. She watched with eyes wide as the creature howled and tossed about before it fell, the fire leaving it as it burned… flickered… and then shattered in crimson-red spots of aether… glowing like dying embers.

Claire stood there, breathing hard and staring in shock at what just happened… at what she had just done. The axe was nothing more than melted metal and charred wood and she let it fall to the ground as she breathed in hard, coughing out the ash. With a shaky hand, she wiped the sweat from her brow as she stared around, struggling to believe that all that just happened.

As she stared though, the fire slowly began to die around her, taking much of the heat with it and she could feel a cool breeze soothing her skin. That was when her eye caught something… a crystal was lying just a few feet from her, the fading light from the fire caused it to glisten and twinkle up at her. She turned to look more closely and realized that this crystal was identical to the one she already carried with her—only…?

She stepped up to look and reached out to touch it… only for the crystal to move towards her. She stared in amazement as it slowly began to float upwards, towards her waiting hands, and stopped at just the perfect height for her. She held her hands out where it shone brightly between and she could feel the heat from it. Almost like a tiny flickering flame was pulsating in front of her and when she stared at it, she could see and hear the crackling of fire as it burned as brightly as cinders.

And that was when everything faded around her. She blinked and the next thing she knew was that she was standing within the dark, empty space once again. She was completely alone as she stood upon that glittering pattern that she could not recognized. However, it wasn’t the same as last time for the bright blue crystal she carried with her was settled within one of the little circles where once an empty space used to be. But her attention was still focused on the bright red crystal she held aloft… watching as it glowed brightly before a pillar of light burst from another of the empty parts of the sigil. She looked up in time to gaze at the light as it released a beam of light high above them and shattered so that the twinkling specks of aether floated back down around her.

And then she opened her eyes to realize she was standing back in that empty canyon where she fought against Ifrit. The fires had almost died completely at this point, but she could still see the traces of the smothers in a vast circle around her and she realized that it wasn’t just a dream.

She had fought against a primal…

She was alive…

She let out a shaky breath just as she heard someone calling out.
“Claire!” called the familiar voice, and she turned in time to see that it was Thancred running towards her with a face full of worry.

“Thancred?” she questioned, slightly in a daze as he skidded to a stop in front of her, staring as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“Pray forgive my lateness…” he gasped, his voice raspy from running straight here. She just looked on, her vision slightly hazy and everything around her swayed dangerously—she barely even noticed the group of Immortal Flames that were running to the captives.

“I was delayed by a congregation of Amalj’aa zealots,” Thancred told her, still looking over her as if afraid that she would disappear if he turned away. “I swear, each seemed more evangelical than the last…”

She tried to say something, but she was so light-headed now that she was having a difficult time in trying to get her tongue to form words. Instead, there was a furious growl behind her and Thancred turned to see that an Amalj’aa was racing towards them. And judging from his furious expression, he was trying to strike her down for what she had just done.

“Persistent lot!” she heard him snarl, pulling out a handful of daggers as he leapt into the air so lightly that one could almost swear he could fly. She watched as he twisted his body about as graceful as a swan would before letting his knives fly. She watched that they flew, straight as any arrows from a bow, and hit their mark in the lizardman’s thick hide. In fact, he crumpled to the ground, dead, before Thancred even landed himself.

“Impressive,” she muttered as she walked over to stand with him, noticing how the Immortal Flames had already captured the two responsible for this. She watched as they held the Flames traitor and Ungust, still bound, as they checked on the others.

“I think that you got that backwards,” Thancred said, still staring at her as if he couldn’t look away.

“I see the Bloodsworn wasted no time extracting the captives. No less than I’d expect from the Flame General’s hand-picked men,” she heard him state with an edge of respect in his voice before it turned to disgust when he set his eyes on the two who caused this and added, “As for those two traitors…It is fair to say that their hardships have only just begun. They have much to answer for.”

She hoped so. At least everyone was still alive. She shook her head, trying to clear it as her throat felt as dry as the desert sands beneath her feet. Thancred looked to her and saw just how much she was struggling just to remain upright and steadied her as he said, “I feel I owe you yet another apology, Claire. Had I known this mission would prove so dangerous, I would never have left you to face it alone. You have been given a veritable baptism of fire.”

She tried to smile, but he seemed to understand that she was not in the mood to speak. Thanks to a nearby Immortal Flame, they followed him the rest of the way out of the canyon and back to Camp Drybone where they were taking the other abductees.

“What… what happened to Ifrit?” she questioned him at one point as he handed her a pouch full of water that she savored every single drop and he took the time to examine the burns on her hands.

“Once you defeated him, he could no longer hold onto his form,” he explained as he dabbed a thick cream onto the burns and wrapped them up with a roll of cloth. “You see, that body was made of aether from all the crystals the Amalj’aa gathered and was able to hold onto its shape from the prayers of his faithful. But it used up so much of its aether fighting you… that there wasn’t enough to keep him around.”
He tried to explain more of why he was so late and how they were able to track them down, but she barely paid any attention as they continued the rest of the way to Camp Drybone. She could not shake the light-headedness from her mind but the more that she tried to recover, the more she began to suspect that it was less to do with her battle and more to do with…?

She put her hand to her chest to where she could feel both crystals inside her very soul, both of them practically singing when she touched to where they were.

“What is it?” Thancred questioned urgently next to her, “Are you hurt anywhere else?”

She shook her head, half truthful, as she gritted her teeth, determined to bring herself back to Camp on her own. It was no small amount of ruckus when she got back. Already she could see the kidnapped people all being brought in and examined by the people of the church while she was being looked after.

After several minutes of reassuring them that she was not at Thal’s Realm, she stepped away and went in search of Thancred, who had just finished speaking to a few of the soldiers.

"Ah, Claire, there you are. If you are worried about getting back on your feet, fret not. There is no better time for you to take to recover. After witnessing their god’s ignominious defeat, the Amalj’aa will be less inclined to risk our wrath—for a time, at least."

Well that was one good thing—for the last thing she wanted was to face Ifrit again anytime soon.

“Now, where were we? Ah, yes…” Thancred went on before his grin faded and he looked on solemnly—something that she found rather uncharacteristic of the cheerful person she came to associate with him. “I was in the process of apologizing. I do hope you can forgive me. I arrived too late to be of any use…to you or the abductees. They may be whole of body, but the same cannot be said of their minds. For once a man is tempered…”

She shook her head, giving him a smile, which he returned. Though she suspected it was more to try and reassure her that he didn’t blame himself for what happened—which she didn’t buy for a moment.

“Ah, but it ill suits me to dwell on the negatives,” he said, clearing his throat and going on brightly, “Amidst all our misfortunes, there is still reason to rejoice. Ifrit is slain, and by your hand, no less!”

Yet, her mind carried her away as she remembered the strange feeling of floating away and the light…? In fact, she was still so drawn to what happened after her battle, she had actually forgotten her battle with the Lord of the Inferno.

“What a marvel you are…” she heard him whisper. When she glanced at him he explained, "That is the deed of no ordinary individual, Claire. Not that I ever thought you were ordinary. On the contrary, I have long suspected that you have the potential to shape the fate of this realm. What can I say? My fine eye for talent remains undimmed."

She could not help but chuckle at that, feeling her face turning red at the praise… at least until she noticed the grimness in his tone when he turned his gaze to the Immortal Flames.

“Are you alright?” she asked in concern.

“Hah, normally it’s my job to cheer downhearted maidens?” he asked with a rough laugh as he gave her a weary smile. “Nay, my lady, I believe I should be asking you that. Are you going to be alright?”
"Yes," she reassured him, "Nothing I won’t recover from. I fear I’ll have to look into a new weapon, but other than that, I think I’ll live."

"I am glad to hear that," he chuckled as he placed a hand on her shoulder. "I am truly glad. I would hate for our budding friendship to have been cut short before it blossomed into something grand."

He then clapped his hands together as he said in a more upbeat tone, "Minfilia will be proud beyond all reckoning when she hears of your deeds. I trust you shan’t object to my bearing the tidings to her. That way I can claim to have contributed something to this mission."

"You did plenty," she reassure him and he laughed again, but this time she could tell that he didn’t believe it.

"Says the champion who did all the real work and brought a new peace to Thanalan this day," he told her as he bowed low. "But, nevertheless, I thank you for your kind words, my friend."

He stood and finished, "In the meantime, Claire, you have earned yourself a rest. Take some time to recover, and return to the Waking Sands when you are good and ready. We can discuss matters in more detail then. Just don’t take too long, will you? The realm’s problems won’t solve themselves."

And with a parting hand, he turned and teleported away as Claire’s head continued to spin. She got some more water from some of the Immortal Flames and took a short while to rest and clear her head before she felt ready to travel.

Feeling that she would not be able to teleport away without being sick, she chose to take the long way back. So she hired a chocobo from the nearest porter to take her there.

The rest of her ride to Vesper Bay was spent in silence as she could still feel the flames searing her skin, still breathe in the smell of smoke and ash, and could still hear the roar of the primal in her ears...? She shook her head hard, thinking longingly of some sleep and a cool bath. She had a feeling that she was going to be smelling like smoke for weeks after this.

When her porter dropped her off at the entrance to Vesper Bay, she was wondering just what sort of business she got herself mixed up in.

When she entered the Waking Sands, the first thing she met with was Tataru, who couldn’t have looked happier to see her alive. She actually flung herself at her, worrying over the smallest of cuts and burns she still bore before Claire was able to convince her that she was still in one piece. After telling her how foolish it was to fight a primal, and how utterly amazing she was to have dealt with it, Tataro allowed her back downstairs so that the others could continue with their praise.

*Minfilia*

She had not known that this was going to happen.

Had she, she never would have allowed them to investigate on their own. Minfilia had just been going over some reports and contact information when Thancred had contacted her over the linkpearl, informing her that they had been betrayed and the Immortal Flames who went to deal with the kidnappers... were taken themselves... including Claire.

Thancred was besides himself, cursing and blaming himself for allowing her to go on her own when he should have known that this was a trap.

"Just do what you can," she told him hurriedly, "It may not be too late!"
"R-Right," he stuttered, "I’ll be gathering more Immortal Flames and lead the charge myself. The good news is that we were able to track them this time! Apparently they were taken to southern Thanalan. With luck...?"

He trailed off there, though they both knew that the odds of getting there in time were slim.

“Godspeed,” she told him softly.

She spent that entire evening worried sick and terrified. It were times like this that made her curse her own uselessness in battle. When she informed all of the Waking Sands of what was going on, they were all holding their breaths... waiting.

Finally, after hours of waiting, Thancred contacted her once again, informing her of what happened.

“You are certain of this?” Minfilia gasped, finding it almost beyond all hope that she had heard him correctly.

“I can confirm it with mine own eyes,” he reassured her, “I arrived in time to witness the event. She brought low the Lord of the Inferno!”

Thancred promised to explain everything in details when he returned to the Waking Sands, but he reassured her that their newest recruit was still very much alive and in the right state of mind. But it wasn’t until she saw Thancred standing there before her did she breathe the sigh of relief.

“I apologize in the delay,” he told her, looking tired and strained, “But I had to see to the Immortal Flames and...?”

He stopped as she walked around the desk and gave him a brief hug.

“I’m sorry for worrying you,” he apologized when she pulled back. “But, in truth, I hardly did anything here. Any words of thanks or praise should go to our new friend. After all, ‘tis by her hand that Ifrit fell and everything taken care of.”

“Unbelievable,” she stated. “I had high hopes for her but...?”

“I know,” he said, “Yet I saw the very ending of the battle. Allow me to begin at the beginning.”

And so he told her of their efforts to track down the kidnappers in Camp Drybone. How they learned from one of the sisters of the church that the thug Ungust was the one who had been helping the Amalj’aa by supplying them with victims for the sacrifices. After discovering this, the Immortal Flames hosted a stakeout to catch the Amalj’aa and rescue the captives…

“By the time that I arrived there with back up, they were already gone,” he told her miserably. “From the signs of things, they put up a fight. But lost to sheer numbers. It was a small blessing that we were able to follow their trail to Southern Thanalan... when we saw the sky turn dark and the roar of a primal.”

“And then...?” Minfilia questioned, not liking with how pale he had turned.

“I feared the worst,” he confessed. “Though I know she has the Echo and therefore is protected from tempering... she was still being served to Ifrit on a silver platter! Her and all those others...?”

He sighed as he ran his hand through his silvery-white hair and confessed, “I am sorry to have to report this to you... but while our new friend made it out with her mind intact... the others weren’t
as fortunate. I received word from the Immortal Flames that all the others, including the traitors who caused this, were tempered. Those who weren’t sacrificed, are to be put to death.”

Minfilia’s eyes saddened and her heart ached so greatly that it was as if there was a knife in her chest.

“I arrived in time to see her bring Ifrit down,” he added again. “I must say… with how she handled it… it almost makes me wish I could have seen the entire battle. Those last few moments will stand out in my mind forever, if truth be told. She was… words fail me.”

“Is she alright?” Minfilia questioned urgently. “Is she injured or…?”

“Aside from some burns and scorched hair, she escaped unharmed,” he promised her. “She should be here any moment now and I recommend that we allow her a few days of rest. I must say that this was not at all how I intended for her first mission to end.”

“Then… it’s over…?” Minfilia questioned.

“For now,” he said, looking away and she could recognize the bitterness in his face.

“Thancred,” she tried to soothe, but he was shaking his head.

“Don’t,” he pleaded, “I’m not the one you should try to console. This is my fault.”

“Thancred, how can you say such a thing?” Minfilia questioned, her tone a little sharper, “You did all that you could. You never could have guessed that this would happen?”

“I should have known that this was a trap!” he answered back. “I should have been there to help! Instead, I missed the entire thing and look at what that cost us!”

“You’re being too hard on yourself,” she reasoned.

“No, I am being honest,” he answered with a shake of his head. “Had I been on hand, I could have helped them. Could have given them time to escape, if nothing else. Instead, I missed everything and allowed good men and women to be captured.”

“But you got there in the end,” she reminded him.

“And what good did that do?” he asked grimly, “…My late arrival nearly cost Claire her life! I wasn’t there when the Amal’aa took her prisoner… And I wasn’t there when they served her to Ifrit…” He ran his hand through his hair again, and she could see the shadows under his eyes and the gauntness in his face as he added, “Yes, by some miracle she survived— but that does not excuse the fact that she should never have had to face such dangers alone! I failed her utterly. Just as I’m failing you all…”

Thancred was always one to blame himself whenever things went wrong. She tried again to try and reassure him, but she could see that nothing she said here this day was going to help him come to terms with what happened.

“What’s done is done, Thancred. You can ill blame yourself for every—” she began, trying to reason with him when there was a knock at the door.

They looked up to see that Claire had returned to them, alive and in one piece. She was covered with ash and she could see how her hands were heavily bandaged as the smell of smoke followed her inside… but otherwise, she was looking alive and as well as could be expected. She smiled in
relief to see her again as Thancred quickly wiped the self-loathing off his face, turning back to Claire with as cheerful an attitude as he could muster.

“Claire!” she exclaimed. “It is so good to see you again!”

“Impeccable timing!” Thancred added in a bright tone that almost made it feel that he had not spent the last hour confessing some of his frustrations and guilt. “I had just finished regaling Minfilia with your heroic exploits.”

Indeed, if nothing else, Thancred did go through much pains in describing the part of the battle that he had seen. Every move, every attack… she could almost picture it happening inside her mind as he told the tale.

“Thancred told me everything,” she told her, wanting to get her looked after as soon as possible, “You have done well to return to us.”

Claire just gave a rather weary smile as Thancred added, “The perils you faced were undeniably great, yet a part of me believes that I had no cause to fear. And now we can put paid to our long investigation. As we suspected, the Amalj’aa undertook both the robbery and the abductions with the aim of summoning their primal, Ifrit.”

That seemed a rather simplistic way to put it, but she knew he was right. However, if the reports that she got from the others proves true, that may not be the last time that they come face-to-face with a primal. “Nor is this tale limited to Ul’dah. Similar incidents have been rife in both Limsa Lominsa and Gridania of late,” she informed them.

Claire was looking confused at that, which Thancred saw and quickly explained, "I daresay you’ve been curious as to how these crimes are linked to the primals.” When he had her attention, he went on to say, “Permit me to explain. Having manifested in the physical realm, primals must consume aether if they are to maintain their presence here. And the stronger they become, the more aether they require. Now, aether exists throughout creation. It flows through all life, and permeates the very air that we breathe.”

While they still did not fully understand the idea of summoning or how the beast tribes were able to do so, they knew this much at least.

“Alas, this alone will not suffice to sustain the likes of Ifrit,” Thancred told her, “Nay, he and his kind require a more concentrated source of aether — crystals.”

“It is for this reason that the incidents involving crystals can often be traced back to a primal,” Minfilia added for her.

"Which leaves us with the why of the abductions,” Thancred spoke up again. “To understand this, you must first understand how primals are born. When all is well with the world, primals possess no physical form. Their essence is dispersed across the great river of aether.”

It was also because of this fact that they were struggling to find a way to find a permanent way on how to deal with the primals. If they could find a way to do that, then they could prevent other poor souls from suffering a similar fate.

“However, when the world is plunged into chaos, those who worship the primals cry out to their gods for deliverance from suffering,” she sighed, knowing that one way that they could deal with this was to find a lasting peace for all the races of Eorzea. Alas, that was still a long road away from them and they must continue on however best that they could.
“These cries serve as a beacon towards which a primal’s essence is irresistibly drawn,” she added, “It is this coming together – or ‘aetheric coalescence’ – which grants the beings physical form. Once born, a primal gains strength from its followers’ worship. The more numerous and fervent they are, the more powerful their god becomes.”

“So… the more followers they have the stronger they get?” Claire asked in that soft voice once again.

“But the primals are seldom satisfied with such reverence as their adherents freely give,” Thancred continued, “And in order to gain more power, they do not scruple to create followers. They do this by ‘tempering’ mortals— a process to which you yourself were subjected.”

She was sure she saw Claire shiver slightly and she knew that she must have gone through the same tempering process as the others. Yet, the fact that she still stood here, was proof that she had the Echo.

“Yet even as Ifrit took your comrades in his thrall, you alone remained unaffected,” Minfilia reassured her. “This is thanks to the power you possess—the Echo.”

“That was what protected me?” she asked, looking up in surprise.

Minfilia nodded as she explained, “We know not the why of it, but those blessed with the Echo are immune to primal influence.” She paused there as she wondered that for what felt like the millionth time. It was something she honestly could not explain. Despite all the gifts that the Echo afforded her, she was unable to find answers as to why they were blessed in such a way. “It is as though a greater power protects us…”

She shook her head, knowing that they should just be grateful that this unpleasant business was over and dealt with.

“When you first came to us,” she reminded her. Was it truly only a couple days ago? “I told you that the Echo would be instrumental in dealing with the primal threat. I trust you now begin to see why.”

She nodded back with a solemn expression that made her wish to ask what happened during the battle, but felt a sense of guilt in so doing—knowing that she had been the one who had given her this mission to begin with.

“The recent incidents all share a common trait: meticulous planning,” Thancred said gravely, “Such elaborate designs are a new development, and one which fills me with an unshakable sense of foreboding.”

“While I share your concern,” Minfilia told him, shaking her head fondly, “My presiding feeling is one of relief at your safe return, you two.”

“What of the others?” Claire asked suddenly, “The Immortal Flames and the other kidnapped victims? What is to become of them?”

Minfilia felt even more guilt eating away at her insides. She still doesn’t know that, does she? She shared a look with Thancred out of the corner of her eyes before she cleared her throat.

“Ah, the Immortal Flames assured me that they will deal with the aftermath, so you need not concern yourself with that,” she said with a rather forced smile that she wasn’t sure was as convincing as she hoped it would be. “We may rest easy for a time.”
Claire was hiding something from her, she could all but feel it in her gut.

When she asked what was to become of those tempered by Ifrit, there was something in her eyes that did not seem... right. She had no reason to think that she was lying, but there was something about this that she didn’t want to tell her.

But rather than continue on, Minfilia just gave her a rather shaky smile as she told her, “I suggest you take full advantage of the respite, Claire. You may be sure it won’t last long. Once the people learn the identity of the hero who felled Ifrit, I fear you will have nary a moment to yourself!”

Hero? Hardly. She was thrown to the wolves and just had to fight her way out. That hardly seemed like a heroic thing to her. But the idea of rest sounded so good to her right now that she could not refuse and she nodded, ready to leave.

As Claire was getting ready to leave, ready to find an inn room or someplace here in the Waking Sands to rest in, Thancred caught her by her arm and pulled her off to the side with a grave expression she did not like.

“Whether she intended to or no, Minfilia neglected to tell you something—something I think it would be best you heard from one of us,” he warned as he leaned in to whisper in her ear. “It concerns the tempered abductees that were rescued... I am sorry to report that all are to be put to death, the Flames with whom you were imprisoned included. Needless to say, this information must not be made known to the public.”

She stared at him, horrified by this news.

“But... why would they do that?” she questioned, “They did nothing wrong.”

Thancred just sighed with a mournful expression before he looked away.

“I swear to you that we would not do this if there were any other recourse—but once a man is tempered, he is tempered for life,” he informed her, “His very existence lends strength to the primal whom he cannot choose but worship.”

“Then... there is nothing we can do to help them?” she asked and he nodded.

“And so we Scions continue our fight, that no more innocents need be sacrificed,” he finished, letting her go, “I hope that you will continue to stand with us, Claire.”

He then gave her a bracing smile before clapping her on the shoulder.

“But I should be going. I must offer my apologies to the Flame General for the losses his people suffered,” he told her before holding up his hand in farewell. “Till next time!”

She nodded as she watched him leave—yet when he felt that he was a safe distance away, her hearing picked up on his words—which now sounded unmistakably bitter.

"Gods forgive me... How many more lives...?" she heard him asked sorrowfully, “Louisoix would never have allowed this to happen. I have to do better... I have to be stronger...”

Her heart went out to him as she watched him leave... she wanted to go after him, to reassure him that what happened wasn’t his fault. But she had no idea what she could say to make what happened any better.
She was eventually lead to another room where there were a series of beds set up for a makeshift infirmary. Minfilia had insisted on her getting treated, but as Y’shtola looked over her wounds, she made a surprising discovery in that the worst of the wounds had already healed. Aside from the cuts, which she cleaned and closed, there wasn’t much more she could do apart from taking care of her burnt hands.

“What you need now more than anything, its rest,” Y’shtola reassured her. “We’ll get you cleaned up once you have that.”

And so Claire laid back gratefully, feeling exhaustion to her bones as Y’shtola left her alone. But for a long while after that, she could only stare up at the ceiling as she thought more and more about what happened.

At some point, she pulled out both crystals and gazed at them above her head so that the faint light from the candle could catch in their facets and they twinkled. She wasn’t sure what was going on, but she was certain that these two crystals were the key to it. They were a gift, Y’shtola had said, gifts from the Mothercrystal. She just gazed at both blue and red… as if hoping that they would start speaking and tell her what was happening. But eventually her weariness settled in and she curled up, the crystals sinking back into her chest, right above her heart, and she felt herself stray back into the peaceful nothingness of sleep.

*Thancred*

“Thancred, please,” Minfilia pleaded as she watched him almost tearing out his hair at this.

But he could not sit still. What happened out there… there was no excuse. He wasn’t working anywhere near hard enough. Not only did his lateness almost cause their newest recruit her life, his lack of foresight caused the whole mess to begin with. No, not only that but they still had to deal with the loss of so many innocent souls that were being put to death at this very moment. None of this should have happened… he could have prevented it from ever happening and he could not.

“I cannot help but feel that I am letting you all down,” he muttered bitterly once again.

“You are not,” she promised him, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. “I just spoke with Y’shtola and she told me that Claire’s alright. She’s been tended to and we’ll make sure that she gets plenty of rest and anything else. And Ifrit was stopped as well… that must count for something.”

“Yeah,” he sighed, “I left her to do all the work and she took care of the problem for us because I was careless.”

“That’s unworthy of you,” Minfilia scolded.

No, it was not. He had barely managed to arrive in time, and even then, what could he have realistically have done in the face of a primal? Not only were they separated by a ring of fire, he would surely have been tempered the moment he crossed that line. He had no choice but to let her fight for her life while he watched.

Alright, so he barely knew her but he had already grown quite fond of her. She was his charge… he was responsible for her safety and look at how spectacularly he failed at that. Turns out that she didn’t need his protection at all but he needed to do better. This wasn’t excusable anymore and he could not find anything to say or do that could make up for his mistakes.

He wasn’t Louisoix, but they needed him now more than ever. Minfilia was doing a fine job of
leading them so far, but he could tell that she needed their old mentor back more than anyone. She was struggling to keep everything together and he was making it worse by finding her his pillar of strength that kept him supported and cared for. But it should be the other way around.

It was for that reason he patted said woman’s hand and smiled as he stood up and walked a few steps away.

“You are being too hard on yourself,” she told him, “You never could have known what was going to happen.”

“I should have guessed that someone in the Immortal Flames was helping them,” he told her. “It wasn’t until I saw the sight of the attack did I put all the pieces together. I should have been more careful and think for once.”

He shook his head as he remembered the look of anguish in the Flame General’s eyes when he was told of all those poor people who were going to be put out of their misery. No words could bring him comfort there.

“Minfilia,” he said, “Alphinaud came to you before about a mission, did he not?” He spun around to look at her and added, “Whatever it is, please, I beg that you let me help with it.”

“Oh, well I…” she stuttered, taken aback. “In truth, Alphinaud suggested that you were the best one to look into this, but I told him that I wasn’t sure…”

“Well, you can tell him now,” Thancred reassured her. “Now what is this mission about?”

“I… alright,” she said, “It has something to do with the Paragons. Or the Ascians as we know them. He asked that one of us look into learning everything they can about the Ascians and what their plans are. It is far from an easy task but…”

“I’ll do it,” he said.

Minfilia wasn’t happy about this and the two argued for a time about the dangers and risks involved.

“Thancred, we still don’t know how powerful or dangerous they are,” she reminded him. “It will be like going in there completely blind?”

“Well, how are we to find out if we remain here where it’s safe?” he questioned. “If Alphinaud believes me to be the best choice, then I shall endeavor to prove it.”

“No, I think that it’s best that we try to study up on them first,” she said, worry written all over her face. “Once we study up on all we can then…”

She trailed off, but he knew that she was just concerned for him. He sat her down and explained how important it was to him to try and make up for his mistakes. He welcomed this chance to prove himself and try to prevent even more needless deaths. But if it made her feel better, he promised he would spend the next few days here at the Waking Sands and reading every book he could get his hands on that even mentioned the Paragons before he set out to explore.

In the end, she agreed and he went off to their own personal library to begin his research. He only wished that it was to be that easy. He looked through dozens of books for the next few days, with barely anything to show for it. In some of the history books he had read, once in a while he would get a glimpse at a passage that mentioned those ‘cloaked in shadows’ but for all the good that they did to him they may have been metaphors. The only clues that he had were that these shadowy
people seemed to be showing up close to times of great disaster.

But all in all, he was having a hard time trying to find a way added everything together. There were plenty to talk about the hooded mages of Mhach but none of them really seemed to fight to profile of who or what the ascians were. The closest he could find was of two lines he found in one of the older tomes:

*Known also as 'Paragons', these malevolent black-robed figures sow the seeds of conflict across the lands of Eorzea. Just as their faces are concealed by sinister masks, the true motives of the Ascians remain obscured behind veils of secrecy and terror.*

He memorized those few words, but that was all the good that he could find of it. He checked the chronometer on the wall and he let out a long whistle of surprise to realize that he had been here all day and it was now well into the night. He rubbed his exhausted eyes as his mind was now screaming at him to get some food and rest.

No… he couldn’t risk it. He couldn’t make any more mistakes.

He reached for another book. He *had* to keep working.
A Hero in the Making

Chapter Summary

Just when you think that you're given a break, we have people trying to break down the doors to recruit you into service. But hey, there are worse things to be, aren't there? At any rate, it's best to do your research and look into the companies who are trying to hire... otherwise you'll end up running errands for them all day.

When Y’shtola had found her awake the next day, she ordered Yda to make herself useful and to prepare a bath for their 'returning hero'. Claire tried to tell her that she could handle it, but they insisted on doing this much for her. To be truthful, she was grateful. She had awoken feeling much better than she had over the last few days, and when she taken to a small bathroom with a tub, she couldn’t help but sigh in longing at the sight of it.

She was given a screen for privacy as Y’shtola was leaving a towel for her.

“Are you sure you are feeling well?” she asked as Claire stepped into the tub, hissing slightly at her burns still aching from before.

“I’m fine,” was all she could say. It was hard to tell if Y’shtola believed her, but she didn’t press the matter as she called to her that she left some medical supplies out for her to use if she desired. If she was to need anything else, she had to but ask. After she was cleaned up and bandaged up, the moment she stepped out of the bathroom, the Scions scattered about were already hailing her as if she were a returning hero.

She could only laugh and wave at them all, trying not to reveal how awkward it felt to be cheered at like this. Minfilia had insisted that she take a few days off to rest before returning and so that was what she did. Or rather… find something else to keep her entertained before coming back. She couldn’t stand the thought of just lying around here for the next week or so, so she decided to venture more into the other guilds across Eorzea. She found herself looking more into the conjurer guild in Gridania and learning the art of alchemy in Ul’dah. Not only that, she was beginning her lessons in the art of the sword while also trying her hand at the bow. Soon enough though, she was so drawn to so many different forms of fighting—magical or otherwise—that she was having a hard time trying to decide which one she wanted to really focus on.

In the end, when she finally came back to the Waking Sands to see if they had more work for her, she had settled on practicing with a thamaturge staff that she gotten from five very mischievous brothers in Ul’dah. When she next entered the solar, she found Minfilia at her desk once again, going over some official-looking papers.

“Claire, you have quite the timing,” Minfilia said with a rather amused look.

Claire tilted her head curiously as Minfilia chuckled and explained, “Until not so very long ago, you were but one of the many adventurers seeking to make their way in Eorzea. But for your character and courage, you were raised to the esteemed post of envoy. Thereafter, you traveled the realm, aiding those in need without thought of reward, confirming to Y’shtola that the Scions would benefit from your air. And no sooner had you joined us than you personally bested the primal Ifrit.”
Did she have to remind her of that thing? She was still trying to get the smell of burning smoke out of her hair. What she couldn’t see was where Minfilia was going with this?

“You have achieved a great deal in a short time, and won fame in so doing,” Minfilia went on, still smiling as she danced around what she wanted to say, “Alas, fame does not come without a price, as you will soon discover.”

Claire blinked, slowly beginning to see what she was talking about.

“In other words…?” she said slowly as Minfilia stepped out from behind the desk and was looking to the door.

“We have guests, Claire – or rather… you have guests,” she finished. And no sooner did those words leave her lips did she hear hurried footsteps. No sooner did her ears pick up on them though, did the doors to the solar burst open to reveal three men dressed in three different colors of uniforms. Not only that, but they were followed by Tataru, who looked as if she had been trying to hold back a herd of algoats… but was unsuccessful.

“Beg pardons!” one of them shouted—Claire wasn’t sure which one—before they seemed to remember where they were and saluted. She looked over them all, realizing she had seen their uniforms before many times. The tall Roegadyn was in the familiar uniform of the Maelstrom, while a scared-looking Elezen was in the bright yellow of the Serpents of the Twin Adders, and finally the shorter Hyur was of the Immortal Flames.

“Oh, Lady Minfilia,” the Immortal Flames officer exclaimed, as if just noticing that Minfilia was in the room, “Radiant as always!”

The Twin Adders soldier was next to speak, “I am given to understand that the Scions of the Seventh Dawn have but recently welcomed a new hero into their midst!”

“I am here on behalf of the Maelstrom, Grand Company of Limsa Lominsa,” the Roegadyn in red added, “to offer said hero a place of honor within our ranks!”

Claire’s jaw fell open slightly at that as Minfilia shrugged, rather bemused, at the three and turned to Claire.

“As you can see, Claire, your recent exploits have garnered you the attentions of the Grand Companies of Eorzea. Each organization would have Ifrit’s bane for its own. To this end, all three have sent officers to…” she paused for a moment before settling on, “court you.”

Seriously? All of this for her? She wanted nothing to do with any of this. Joining one organization was enough for her, she had no interest in becoming any soldier.

Minfilia looked back to the other officers, who were now staring at Claire with excitement—which was making her rather uncomfortable, as the Antecedent finished, “They would not ordinarily go to such lengths to enlist a new recruit. That they have is evidence of their high regard for you.”

Was she supposed to be flattered or not? Claire honestly had no clue.

Minfilia paused there for a moment as if she just remembered something and looked to Tataru with a raised eyebrow as she asked, “I find myself wondering how word of Claire’s deeds spread so quickly. That the Immortal Flames should know of her triumph is to be expected…but what of the other Grand Companies?”

At the question, Tataru flushed pink and gave a little squeak as she flailed about in embarrassment;
pretty much confirming the answer for them.

Claire sighed at that, but it seemed that the officers were ready to get down to business.

“Your reputation precedes you, Mistress Claire!” the Twin Order officer proclaimed, “’Tis no ordinary woman who can face a primal and emerge the victor!” He then grinned in a way that she wasn’t entirely sure she liked as he finished, “The Order of the Twin Adder has need of valiant women such as you. Join your strength to ours, friend, and together let us ensure that peace ever reigns over the Twelveswood!”

“I… see,” was all she could muster. In all honesty, she knew precious little of Gridania and the troubles that they were facing there. Tis true she thought it a beautiful place—and she had immediately liked the Elder Seedseer… but she wasn’t keen to join when she had no idea what she was getting into. She made that mistake before when she agreed to join the Scions without fully understanding what a primal was after all and didn’t wish to repeat it.

That was when the Immortal Flames officer stepped forward, looking eager as well as he said, “What a pleasure it is to finally meet you, Mistress Claire! My comrades speak of you in glowing terms.”

She nodded to him in understanding, though she was having a hard time trying to erase from her mind the news of what became of some of his comrades and those poor innocent people who suffered from Ifrit’s Tempering. In truth, she wasn’t sure how she should feel right now with speaking to one who represented them and the Flame General right now when she felt that she could have done more.

“A woman of your courage and talent belongs with us in the Immortal Flames,” he asked, “Join your strength with ours, friend, and together let us secure a prosperous future for Ul’daah!”

Her gaze then drifted over to the Maelstrom member, who needed no cue to speak and proclaimed loudly, “The Admiral was not exaggerating when she said you have the look of a hero! Full often does she speak of you, friend.”

She was really hoping that this was an exaggeration. Because the Admiral she met before was not one who would do that before?

“…As do many others in Limsa,” the officer added quickly, “Long before the rest of Eorzea took note, your name was well known to us, owing to your valorous deeds on behalf of our citizens. It is only natural that we should want you for the Maelstrom. Join your strength with ours, and together let us see the grand vessel of Limsa Lominsa to the shores of glory!”

Claire could only stare at them, unable to find anything to say as they all looked ready to start fighting each other at this point to get her attention. But again, they seemed to remember where they were and they all saluted once more as they said, “Lady Minfilia!”

Minfilia sighed in exasperation at this entire prospect before saying, “Very well…”

Claire had the impression that Minfilia was only doing this to appease the three of them, but she looked to Claire and explained, “Though I am quite sure you need no reminding, mayhap a brief summary of the situation would help to clarify your thoughts on this matter.”

As of right now, she would take another round of fighting lizardmen over this. But she nodded as Minfilia explained, “As you know, the Grand Companies are all-encompassing organizations empowered to call upon the martial, economic, and technological resources of their respective city-
states in times of strife. There are presently three such organizations in Eorzea: the Maelstrom of Limsa Lominsa, the Order of the Twin Adder of Gridania, and the Immortal Flames of Ul’da’h.” She turned to look at the three officers, who each nodded proudly at the mention of their respective Companies.

“Serving a Grand Company means serving the nation to which it belongs,” Minfilia added, “You will be charged with its defense, and tasked with advancing its cause. In return for your faithful service, you will be furnished with various rewards, some of which may well prove useful to you in your other endeavors.”

Yes, that may be true, but she left home to become an adventurer. Free to go wherever she wanted and not be told to fight on the front lines. That was what she wanted. She had no desire whatsoever to sign up with a Grand Company. But she had a bad feeling that these ‘suitors’ weren’t going to let her go without getting an answer. But how could she possibly join them when she knew so little about them?

“I concede that it is no small choice you face…” Minfilia agreed slowly before she had a sudden thought and added quickly, “Ah! A thought occurs to me! You will, of course, recall that the three city-states are planning to hold remembrance services. Well, as part of the proceedings, I am given to understand that the leader of each Grand Company will deliver an address. Hearing these addresses ought to help you make an informed decision.”

So go and hear their leaders for herself and then make up her mind? Well, it wasn’t a terrible idea. And she was curious to see what the other leaders had to say may yet be able to sway her thoughts on what she should do.

“What say you, my dear officers?” Minfilia questioned the three of them, as if asking for permission.

Not a single one of them disagreed with her suggestion and were all up for letting Claire hear their leaders speak before returning here with her decision. In the end, they all decided to remain at the Waking Sands until she came back and they saluted them once more. In fact, they moved to stand off to the side of the solar, and Minfilia sighed once more, clearly not looking forward for their continued presence for the foreseeable future. At least, until Claire returned.

Claire could only smirk at the idea of her trying to work with all three of them watching her. She did not dare laugh though as Minfilia held something out to her. In her palm she held a small pale crystal that resembled a pearl.

“Before you leave, I would have you carry this linkpearl with you at all times, Claire,” she told her as Claire took it and examined it curiously, “It will allow us to stay in touch regardless of location.”

As Claire fit the small crystal into her ear, Minfilia walked back around her desk as she informed her, “Eorzea is changing, Claire, and you have the power to help shape it anew. None can say what the morrow will bring, but so long as we believe in ourselves, there is naught we cannot achieve.”

But not if you aren’t sure who you’re supposed to be.

Claire was full of doubts at this point, and worry over the idea of joining a Grand Company… but she didn’t speak a single word as Minfilia finished, “Now, it is time you made ready for your journey. Before you depart, be sure to speak to Tataru. She will apprise you as to where and when the remembrance services are due to take place.”
The three men then saluted at her once more and Minfilia seemed to force a smile at the three of them as Claire hurried out of the solar. She leaned up against the door, sighing in relief and glad to no longer be under the officers’ expectant stares.

“You give an ilm and they’ll take a yalm,” she whispered to herself as she pushed herself upright and headed to the door. Once she was back in the foyer, she found the very embarrassed Tataru—who had slipped out earlier without notice—and jumped at the sight of her.

“I, um…I’m sorry about the attention you’re getting, Claire…” she mumbled, still red with embarrassment, “I might have sung your praises a little too loudly…and often…to a few too many people.” She coughed awkwardly before finishing, “Ah, next time, I’ll be sure to hold my tongue—literally, if necessary.”

Claire merely shook her head with a smile, reassuring her that it was alright and that there was nothing they could do about it now. Tataru only nodded, though still looking shamefaced as she began to look through a couple sheets of parchment.

“A-Anyway, I expect you want to know where and when the remembrance services are taking place?” she asked, and when Claire nodded, she went on, “If all goes to plan, tomorrow night Gridania’s Grand Company, the Order of the Twin Adder, will hold the first of the three services, and Elder Seedseer Kan-E-Sena will deliver her address at Mih Khetto’s Amphitheatre.”

Ah, so she had the rest of today and tomorrow to get there in time. That should also leave her with plenty of time in between to get some practice in spellcasting.

“The next evening is Ul’dah’s, when Flame General Raubahn Aldynn will be addressing the masses at the Royal Promenade,” she went on before she gave a giggle and added in excitedly, “It’s rumored there’s to be a special guest—how exiting!”

A guest? She was curious about that before Tataru cleared her throat and finished, “The night after, you must make your way to Limsa Lominsa’s Stateroom, where Maelstrom Chief Admiral Merlwyb Bloefhiswyn will be giving her address. Got all that, Claire?”

Claire nodded, reciting off, “Gridania, Ul’dah, and then Limsa Lominsa.”

Tataru clapped eagerly at that before encouraging, “Well, alright then! Off you go! I hope you find the remembrance services suitably educational!”

She gave the Lalafell a friendly wave as she stepped out into the gloomy day. It looked like it may rain later today, but she would hopefully be back in Gridania before that happened. She stretched out, feeling surprisingly energized all of a sudden as she looked around, wondering which way she should take. In the end, she would take the airship back—so she headed off towards Ul’dah…making sure to run into a few wild animals that she could challenge on her way.

One long afternoon of testing her new powers and a long flight later, Claire stepped off the airship landing in the heart of Gridania. No sooner did she step out into the street did she hear word of the ceremony on the lips of every single person she passed. After stopping by the lancer’s guild and testing out the weight of the new lance, she headed off to the Mih Khetto’s Amphitheatre. When she arrived, it was already about to burst with the flood of people—who were all chatting as they waited.

It looked like all of Gridania had come to hear the Elder Seedseer speak. Speaking of which, no sooner did she think that did she appear. The graceful Kan-E-Senna stepped out onto the stage: smiling and nodding at them all with that kind expression that seemed to radiate tranquility.
Others followed her out so that there were four of them on the stage, but they all had their attention on the Elder Seedseer as she stepped forward. She gazed around at them all as if she couldn’t be happier to see them all there.

“Our forebears were once strangers in the Twelveswood,” she called in a soft but graceful voice that seemed to soothe the ears of all listening in. “Fearful of the greenwrath, they hid themselves in the dark recesses of the earth. Yet they dreamed of basking dappled sunlight of the forest. Through great effort, they proved their worth to the elementals, and were granted a place beneath the boughs. So it was that Gridania was born, some five centuries ago. Working hand in hand, the Hyur and the Elezen settlers sowed the seeds of our civilization. And soon they were joined by folk of all races. So nourished by the waters of unity and blessed by the light of the Matron, Gridania flourished into the great nation it is today.”

That was fascinating. Claire found herself pulled into the details of this story even as she heard the footsteps of a few others next to her.

“Do you see the Gridanian standard?” asked a voice.

She looked back at him with mild surprise to see that a pair of young Elezens were standing next to her. The two of them were so identical that they could only be twins… wait… they looked familiar. But before she could say anything, the one who spoke to her before, jerked his head to the dark yellow standard that hung proudly behind the stage.

“There, hanging behind the Elder Seedseer,” he said, speaking as if the two of them knew each other for years, “The entwined serpents represent the unity between Hyur and Elezen. An elegant symbol, do you not agree?”

Serpents were not the most elegant symbol that she could think of, but she wasn’t going to question it. It wasn’t her place. That was when the Elder Seedseer continued with her speech.

“In accordance with the will of the elementals, we have embraced a life of peace,” she called to the crowd, who were continuing to watch with amazement to every word she said, “Alas, our neighbors have not always sought the same for themselves — nor for us. Though we Gridanians have no love for war, we still less for those who would threaten our way of life. Ever have we fought to protect the sanctity of the Twelveswood.”

That was something she could tell the first time that she entered this city. The people seemed to have been very distrusting of outsiders. There was some sort of… she wasn’t sure what the word was that she wanted to use. But there was some sort of cloud that hung over the city of Gridania and she wasn’t sure she liked it.

“When the Garlean Empire brought its war of conquest to Eorzea, we rallied under the noble standard of the Twin Adder, that we might push back the encroaching darkness,” Kan-E-Senna spoke on, “And it was we who prepared the ground for the reformation of the Eorzean Alliance, that all the peoples of this realm might stand united against the common threat.”

She paused there for a moment as the crowd applauded at that. She then smiled a little tiredly, and though Claire could see it, she wasn’t sure that anyone else did, but for that split second when she mentioned the battle at Carteneau, she could see the flash of anguish in her eyes.

“Five years ago, the Alliance met the armies of the Empire upon the fields of Carteneau. It would prove the bloodiest battle in recent memory,” Kan-E-Senna stated, continuing on even though the pain that was in her eyes was clearer now that she was speaking openly about it, “Countless Gridanian lives were lost. As supreme commander of the Order of the Twin Adder, ever shall I
bear the weight of our people’s sacrifice.”

She paused for just a brief second, the weight of her words weighty heavily upon Claire’s own heart as if she had been told to hold onto a heavy stone or something for that moment.

“Alas, their loss was not the only tragedy to befall us that day, for soon came the Calamity,” the Elder Seedseer sighed, “The scars borne by our forest are a constant reminder of its violence. Our lives have been irrevocably changed, each waking hour a struggle to survive. Driven to desperation, some among us have strayed from the path of righteousness, resorting to banditry, poaching, and other unconscionable deeds. To compound our woes, the Ixal have returned in force, emboldened by our suffering. They test our defenses nigh without cease, and prey upon the vulnerable. So beleaguered from within and without, it is of little wonder that our unity now falters. Dark times are upon us.”

It certainly sounded like it. She had seen the Ixal only a couple times when she ventured out into the Twelvewoods, and she could see why they would be a problem. Those long-limbed, feathered, and beak-like faces were more than enough to cause most who strayed near them to flee in terror.

There was a discontented murmur from the crowd, cursing the Ixal and their current predicaments. The Seedseer closed her eyes a moment, and the pained expression was now so great that there was no doubt that everyone had seen it. But with a deep breath, Kan-E-Senna continued, “On this day, five years ago, countless laid down their lives that we might behold another dawn. Please join with me in honoring their memory.”

The crowd all grew silent around them, allowing time to think about all that was sacrificed, but as she also thought of all those who were killed before, she heard the Elezen girl next to her hiss almost angrily to her brother, “And how do you propose to honor the memory of those you cannot remember, pray tell?”

Her brother did not say anything to that as he kept his eyes forward; as if he were waiting for something.

After several moments, the Seedseer resumed her speech. “The destruction wrought by the Calamity was indiscriminate — it dealt death to Eorzean and Garlean alike. Yet while we have labored to rebuild — to rebuild our lives — the Empire has set about raising steel fortresses here in the Twelveswood. Let none be mistaken — the Garleans remain the greatest threat to our survival. If we are to stand against them, we must remember what it is to be united. Our many troubles blind us to the woes of our fellow man. Thence is harmony lost. Yet harmony is the founding principle of Gridania. We are gathered here to honor the fallen. Let them be honored not only in word and thought, but through concerted action! I bid you join hands with me once more beneath the Twin Adder standard! And together, let us heal the forest’s wounds, that our progeny might live in harmony beneath these boughs. For serenity, purity, and sanctity!”

The speech ended, and the crowd erupted in cheers and applause, and the Seedseer smiled warmly at the crowd, turning and leaving the stage as the people let out cries of devotion and loyalty to their nation.

But Claire was left feeling slightly… empty. Nothing in her speech was a lie; of that, she was sure. But at the same time she found it difficult to believe it all. This seemed less like honoring those whose sacrifices that came before… and more like an excuse for recruits? Not only that, but it was over already? She remained behind as she let what she just heard sink in. Gridania was still struggling to get by after the Calamity, but there wasn’t any real time to sit back and properly mourn it. Not when the struggles are at their doorsteps. The Ixali and the Garlean threat was weighing heavily upon everyone’s minds, yet the people here seemed uncertain of what to do.
This may not be her place to say, being an outsider and all, but if they wanted true harmony and unity, wouldn’t it be for the best that they banded together with the rest of the Alliance as they once did?

“If you’ll permit me,” said that voice and she looked up to realize that most of the people had already left while she was lost in thought. The Elezen from before was now turned and speaking to her properly for the first time as he introduced himself.

“Alphinaud,” he said before looking to his sister, who didn’t even bother looking at the two of them, “And my sister, Alisaie, at your service.”

Claire looked over the pair of them: not children, but not quite adults either. He had long white hair that was tied with a blue knot at the end of his ponytail. He seemed to be an Arcanist, judging from the black grimoire hanging on his side, and he was wearing a large delta-shaped earring on his left ear as well as dark blue and white clothing. The only real difference between him and his sister, aside from the color of their ponytail ribbons and collar markings, was that Alisaie’s lips were redder.

Now that she looked at them, she realized that she had seen them before. On the ship that was heading straight to Limsa. What were the odds?

She nodded her head as she introduced herself, “My name is Claire. And the pleasure is all mine. I heard what you said about the standard. Were you speaking to me while you said it?”

He smiled and answered, “I saw at a glance that you were a fellow traveler. You might call us students of history, sampling the realm’s remembrances in pursuit of…” He paused there for the fraction of a second before finishing, “Enlightenment.”

She didn’t answer as she patiently waited for him to continue: curious to see what he had to say on the idea of the speech.

“The Gridanians are unfortunate enough to have to contend with two beast tribes,” he informed her. “The Ixal are unquestionably the more troublesome, being of a naturally warlike disposition, and wont to summon their bloodthirsty primal, Garuda.”

Oh, no… not another primal to worry about. Ifrit was bad enough, but she didn’t even want to know what this ‘Garuda’ was going to be like.

“The sylphs, by contrast, are peaceful in nature, being mischievous rather than malevolent, and have long been on friendly terms with the Gridanians — until recently, at least,” he told her, “Alas, they have grown aloof, a change observed at roughly the time they summoned the primal Ramuh.”

Gods, it felt like primals were everywhere now that she knew of them. How come people weren’t discussing problems like this?

Alphinaud paused, a small, unreadable smile crossing his face before asking, “The Gridanians have no love for war, and they consider open conflict a last resort. Though they clash with the Ixal ever more regularly, you may be assured that they do so in self-defense. As for the sylphs…they are as yet bound by a peace treaty, though one wonders how long it will be before it is broken.”

“I see,” Claire answered, “And what do you think should be done about this?”

It was as if he had been waiting for someone to ask him that very same question, for she saw the twinkle in his eyes as he glanced around at the empty amphitheater and answered, unable to hide just the tiniest hint of disappointment in his voice, “The Twelveswood was grievously wounded
during the Calamity, leaving Gridania vulnerable to attack. The people are hopeful that restoring the wood— and thereby the power of the elementals — will put an end to their woes.”

And would that solve their worries?

As if he guessed what she was thinking, he shook his head, chuckling softly. “Yet how long will that take? Centuries, I’d wager. Meanwhile, the Ixal will continue their incursions, spurred on by Garuda and her insatiable appetite for destruction. Whether the Gridanians like it or not, sooner or later it will come to an all-out war. And when it does, the Order of the Twin Adder will need all the help it can muster.” He shook his head, his expression still amused as he finished, “How valuable might the aid of a capable adventurer prove to them then?”

“I am not sure,” she answered calmly and truthfully, feeling the growing aches and pains of the problems that she knew so little about before now fully weighing down upon her. “I am still new to these lands if I must be honest. And I know little of the history, nor of the problems facing the nations. But I thank you for all that you have said. I found it most… enlightening, myself.”

He smiled back before he gave a short bow and he left with his sister as Claire remained behind, and he wondered if she was merely reflecting upon his words or had already made up her mind.

She watched as he bowed his head and left with his sister, leaving the Amphitheatre to continue on their journey of ‘enlightenment’. She could only watch them go, curiosity burning inside her but not enough to want her to follow after. Something told her that she would see them both again very soon.

“Ah, I thought I recognized you,” said a tranquil voice and she looked around, almost falling over with surprise to see that the Elder Seedseer herself, was making her way towards her. Her guard was following close behind as she approached and Claire bowed respectively to her. But Kan-E-Senna merely held up her hand with that smile as she informed her, “When I saw you in the crowd, I knew I had seen you before. The Lominsan Envoy? It doesn’t feel like that long ago when I last saw you.”

“No, my lady,” she answered back politely. “I’m honored you remember me.”

“How could I not? Especially after hearing that you were the one who had dealt with the troubles in the Tam-Tara Deepcroft?” she asked back and Claire felt a chill go up her spine as she remembered that disturbing place. “In truth, I had been concerned about that place for some time. I was just speaking with some of my advisors on the idea of permanently sealing that place up merely days before this incident. After hearing what you had done to help secure the safety of the Twelveswood and all who live here, it was my greatest disappointment to have learned that you had already left before I could properly thank you.”

“You need not trouble yourself, my lady,” Claire began humbly, but the Elder Seedseer merely smiled fondly.

“I can see why the Admiral spoke so highly of you,” she told her. “I feared that we would not be able to find anyone who would be able to lend us a willing hand with this possible threat, and so relieved I was to hear that there was a brave volunteer.” She then cast her gaze towards the retreating backs of her people and sighed as she added, “Though I confess that some amongst us were suspicious of the fact that it was an outsider—and adventurer—who had stepped forward.”

“Is that a problem?” Claire asked her worriedly and Kan-E-Senna sighed.

“I fear the people of Gridania have always been… distrusting of outsiders,” she sighed. “They are
proud of their nation, as they should be, and I know that many say things that they do not mean out of loyalty. Gridania is fortunate to have such loyal souls to protect her. Yet, I fear that some may tend to judge others a bit too quickly."

“I am glad to see that you don’t seem to think that way, my lady,” Claire informed her as she smiled again.

“It would be foolish to push away those who truly desire to help,” she answered simply. “I apologize if you ever felt that way, but I hope that you don’t think badly of the people here. Even the best of us tend to forget that we cannot fight on our own forever.”

She nodded and that seemed to bring some relief to her.

“When I was informed that the Deepcroft had been cleared out of anything foul, words cannot begin to describe the relief I felt,” she added, her hand over her heart as peace seemed to radiate in her eyes. “Full glad I was to hear of it and I merely wished to thank you in person for all that you have done.”

“I’m glad that I could help,” Claire told her, feeling blush dust her cheeks and the Elder Seedseer chuckled at the sight.

“When I heard that you had joined the Scions of the Seventh Dawn, it brought much succor to my heart,” Kan-E-Senna informed her honestly.

Claire was unable to find anything to say to that for a moment before she realized something odd.

“I’m flattered you think of me that way, my lady. But… forgive me, but how did you know I joined?” Claire could not help but question and she saw the Elder Seedseer merely smile.

“Young Yda could not restrain herself,” she explained and they both laughed at the idea. The Elder Seedseer merely bowed her head before leaving with the rest of the guard, leaving Claire alone to think about what she said. She just tiredly pulled her hair out of her face before turning and heading back to Ul’dah, knowing that she had enough speech to see.

*Ul’dah*

She spun her lance around expertly as she walked the streets of Ul’dah. It was almost dark by the time that she arrived, and when she reached the Royal Promenade, she could see that it was already filled with merchants and citizens. She squeezed in amongst the throng of people gathered in the narrow hallway as she made her way to the front. After she fought her way there, she arrived in time to see a pair of guards dressed in shining armor on either side of the door—as well as general Raubahn.

As well as a young Lalafellin girl. Unlike many of the other inhabitants of the city, she was fair-skinned and had pink hair, just like hers, and dressed in beautiful clothes that befitted royalty. That was when she realized, with a start, that this special guest must have been the Sultana.

Once some of the noise from the crowd died down, the Flame General spoke up in his loud and commanding voice, "Hark you, souls of flame, drawn to the bosom of the desert, where the fire burns brightest and shall rage forevermore! Where since antiquity, under the sage and judicious rule of the Ul Dynasty, we have wrought sand into gold! Where by the Grace and Glory of Nald’thal have our brave sons and daughters flourished and prospered — I speak of Ul’dah!"

As he spoke, she felt eyes on the back of her head and looked back in time to see—not at all surprised—to find Alphinaud and Alisaie making their way towards her. Most of the crowd were
Lalafells, so they weren’t that hard to spot over their heads. She gave them a smile and politely
jerked her head to signal them that they were welcomed to stand next to her before she looked back
to the front.

As the crowd roared with approval at Raubahn’s words, she could feel them coming up to stand
beside her as she heard Alphinaud whisper to her, “There, at the Flame Generals’ back flies the
Grand Company’s standard.”

Her eyes did, indeed, glance at the black banner as he added, “Note the sigil. The golden scales of
order balance the jewel of prosperity with the flame of might.”

Interesting. She wasn’t sure she liked that idea though… especially when it clearly said that the
control of the city was in the hands of the wealthy. Yet, after looking over the city, she couldn’t say
that it was completely a lie.

“I see,” she told Alphinaud simply as Raubahn went on with his own speech.

“Great and many are the gifts our nation has given the realm. In Eorzea’s darkest hour, on the
killing fields of Carteneau, none spent more in blood and gold than we. Thus was the VIIth
Imperial Legion laid low!” he called out.

Truly? From what she knew of it, it was a battle that no one won that day. Apparently, she wasn’t
the only one who thought that, for even over the sound of the cheers, she heard Alphinaud mutter a
little darkly behind her, “So that’s how it happened! How soon history forgets.”

“Yet many left our gates, never to return,” Raubahn resumed after the cheers faded again. “Let us
pray for our absent brothers and sisters, that they might know happiness in the great beyond, as
Thal’s honored guests.”

Claire’s eyes found Raubahn’s face and, just like it had been in Gridania and Kan-E-Senna—she
could see the flash of pain flit across his face. Though he was better at hiding it than the Elder
Seedseer had, the horror of that day seemed to be haunting him.

Yet, just like how it had been at Gridania, the crowd solemnly saluted at his words. And just like
how it had been at Gridania, it did not last long.

“If the fates were fair, the price we paid that day would have brought us victory. Alas, they are not.
And now, but five years into this Seventh Umbral Era, the spirit of sacrifice which granted us our
strength is all but dead.” General Raubahn threw his arms wide. “Look around you. What do you
see? A people divided, downtrodden and enthralled! Where are the merciful alms of the rich?!
Where is the just steel of the righteous?! I ask you: is this the great nation our brothers and sisters
gave their lives to save? You who call this ‘living’ dishonor the name of the Immortal Flames — it
is but a slow death!”

His words seemed to be getting everyone’s attention as they all began to look at each other and
mutter his words amongst themselves.

“Our enemies surround us,” the Flame General went on passionately, “The savage hordes of the
Amal’jaawait beside our roads, strangling the lifelines of trade. Meanwhile, the Garleans make
mock of our borders, and despoil our land of its natural wealth. We stand on a precipice…yet we
do not act. Whether trader or soldier, Monetarist or Royalist, all must recognize that a divided
Ul’dah stands to fall.”

Like with the Elder Seedseer’s words, nothing he was saying was a lie… for she had seen with her
own eyes that he spoke the truth. Yet why did it feel like something was left wanting in his otherwise fervent speech? She wasn’t sure what it was that she was missing here, but there was something that she couldn’t see that was desperately needed to be said.

Raubahn then raised a fist once more to the sky. “Victory and Fortune walk hand-in-hand! Ye who seek glory and wealth! Look not to what little you can snatch from your neighbor, but to the boundless wealth of the world beyond! Now is the time to unite! Now is the time to ride forth! In the name of the sultana, I beseech you! Line not your own coffers, but those of the Immortal Flames! Seek not to prosper from Ul’dah, but to restore her to prosperity! As the realm prospers, so shall Ul’dah. As Ul’dah prospers, so shall her people!”

The crowd erupted once again into applause, and Raubahn turned, kneeling to the Sultana, who stepped forward. Claire could see the trust in the young ruler’s eyes as she actually stepped up and actually settled herself upon the large man’s forearm and was lifted up into the air. She sat prim and proper as if she were upon the throne as Raubahn held her up high above the crowd. The Sultana’s eyes were also sad, but she gave a smile as it was her turn to speak.

“People of Ul’dah! I, Nanamo, seventeenth in the line of Ul, address you,” she called in a sweet voice that was surprisingly loud as it carried over them all. “Much has been made of the wealth of Ul’dah. Yet those who measure that wealth in coins and carats are gravely deceived. For the true wealth of Ul’dah lies in the health, happiness, and hopes of her people. Beloved subjects, I bid you raise aloft the torch of Ul’dah, that her Flames might serve as a beacon for all Eorzea to see!”

It was simple and elegant, but more than enough for the crowd to roar their love for the Sultana. The entire chamber was filled with thunderous applause that seemed to shake the stone walls as Raubahn held his fist up high one more time.

“For Victory and Fortune, stride fearless into the inferno,” he roared. “For we are by fire reborn!”

“He has a gift for speaking,” Claire said causally, “Almost makes me wish I was as well.”

She didn’t realize she spoke out loud until she heard Alphinaud chuckle beside her, though it was quickly lost amidst the loud cries of approval. With all the noise happening around them, it was impossible to have a conversation at the moment. But the three of them patiently waited for the crowd to leave once again before they all turned to each other again.

“Fancy meeting you again,” he said, amusement in his voice.

“A pleasant one,” she smiled back, having been giving a lot of thought over what he said to her before. “Tell me, what did you think? I am curious to know after you made your opinions to me back in Gridania.”

Over his shoulder, she saw Alisaie roll her eyes, as if wondering why she would ask that. But Alphinaud chuckled as he addressed her with his honest thoughts.

“The Ul’dahns have a long history of conflict with the Amalj’aa, the beast tribe that worships the primal Ifrit. Judging from your look of distaste,” he added, when he saw her expression darken and added, “I take it you have encountered them.”

More than she cared to admit. But she only nodded, not wishing to discuss it as he went on explaining, “The Ul’dahns do not shy from confrontation. If aught threatens their precious prosperity, they will seek to crush it.”

So if the Gridania’s had no love of war, the Ul’dahns weren’t afraid to use a more brute force
method to get what they want.

“So they have dealt with Ifrit thus far, smothering his flames each time he is stoked to life,” he added and she felt a shiver going down her spine, “Yet he is but one of several problems. Though they have been quiet these past five years, the Garleans have not gone away. Meanwhile, refugees continue to arrive in droves, and Ul’dah has no clear policy on how to deal with them. After all, not even the sultanate’s coffers are bottomless. And even assuming they had the coin, resources will ever be finite.”

“Interesting,” she said, letting that disturbing news sink in. “Sounds like there are as much problems here as it is in Gridania.”

He nodded as he added, “Which brings me back to the subject of Ifrit. It has been observed that the Amalj’aa are summoning him with ever increasing frequency. Every time they do so, the Ul’dahns send their forces to smite the primal, and though they invariably succeed, each victory is bought with blood. It is a war of attrition which they cannot well sustain. Small wonder, then, that the Immortal Flames are eager to recruit more members.”

Well, he wasn’t shy on telling other people what he thought. A bit snobbish, but she nodded in understanding before she looked away, wondering what she should do. So far, the more she learned about the problems plaguing the cities, the less thrilled she was at the idea of joining.

“At such a desperate hour, an adventurer of your experience would be a most welcome addition to their ranks,” Alphinaud informed her.

“Perhaps,” she agreed. “Though that remains to be seen.” She looked back at him and added, “Thank you once again for your insight. Once more it has been… enlightening. I expect that I will be seeing you at the final service?”

He merely smiled, silently confirming her that they would be there. It looked like he was about to speak more, but his sister had already strode off with an impatient air, as if she could not stand to be there any longer. Claire just watched as Alphinaud gave her a polite bow and followed after her without another word.

She watched them go. Her mind still conflicted on what she should do; but realizing that standing there wasn’t going to help her or anyone else. She still had one last ceremony to visit—and she hoped that it would be enough to help calm the storm of confusion in her own mind. As she made to go, she heard someone ask, “You… wait.”

She stopped at once, turning back, startled to see that it had been none other than General Raubahn and the Sultana standing there.

“General Raubahn… Your Grace…” she said, bowing hurriedly and the Flame General actually laughed and held up a hand to stop her.

“My men have told me all about what you did,” he said as they walked to her, “After listening to their description, I knew who you were at once. You are the one they are now calling Ifrit’s Bane, are you not?”

“Ah, I…” she muttered in embarrassment and he laughed.

“I thought so,” he said good-naturedly, “And as such, you don’t need to bow to anyone for you have accomplished something that most never could. We simply wished to thank you in person for your deeds for Ul’dah. Thancred was the one who told us about how you did everything in your
power to save those taken hostage by the Amal’aa.”

She lowered her head as she felt as if she did not deserve his thanks.

“I’m glad I could help in any way that I could,” she muttered softly, “But it was not enough.”

“You were not to blame for what happened,” the Sultana said, causing her to look down at her in surprise. She had a kind look as she finished, “If nothing else, you avenged those poor souls when you slew Ifrit. That is more than most ever could have done. It is a great loss that we weren’t able to save them, but know that we are truly grateful for your deeds.”

Claire felt her face burning red at their thanks and Raubahn chuckled at the sight.

“Who would have thought the one who laid low the Lord of the Inferno was so shy?” he asked, grinning when she felt her blush burning hotter. “Be at ease lass,” he added kindly, “We just wanted to thank you for your deeds and we will be looking forward to seeing you again.”

To her astonishment, he bowed low to her as the Sultana curtsied, and they left her as they returned to the guards—who seemed just as stunned to have witnessed their two leaders here bow to an adventurer of all people.

She was starting to wonder what she got herself into.

But no time to worry about that now… she had to return to Limsa and see to the final ceremony. She truly hoped that the Admiral would be able to help her make up her mind.

*Limsa Lominsa*

She had known where to go even before her feet reached the stone steps, for she could not think of any other place that the speech would be able to take place. Of course getting there was half the battle, because the crowd that was gathering was already full of people—many of them in various stages of their drinks. She knew that she best be out of here before they all had the chance to finish getting drunk if she wanted to avoid getting stepped on. Some of them do seem like they had been sampling a fair amount of ale before coming here… some were as green as the leaves in Gridania while others were swaying where they stood—like they couldn’t see straight.

She merely followed the crowd until she found her way back into the same room where the banquet had been held just over a week before. Only now that it was so packed that she felt like a sardine shoved into a can. Thankfully, most of the people around her now seemed more sober as they waited for the speech to begin. She glanced around when she neared the front of the room… and soon enough she spotted Alphinaud and Alisaie arriving just as the crowd began to cheer up at the balcony above them.

She looked up as well to see the strong Admiral walk forward. Her sharp hawk-like eyes were gazing down at each and every person before she pounded the air with her fist.

“Brothers and sisters of the sea, hearken unto me!” she called, traces of a pirate still in her voice so that none here could doubt the fact that she had once been a buccaneer herself. “Look upon this, our mighty crimson standard, and tell me your hearts do not swell with pride!”

She allowed them to cheer once more, and continued on, “Seven hundred summers have come and gone since our forefathers first ran aground in this fertile bay. In that time, guided by the Mother of Oceans, Limsa Lominsa has grown from humble fishing village to uncontested ruler of the five seas and beyond!”
“Did you look, as the Admiral bid you?” Alphinaud’s voice asked and Claire’s eyes found the red standard that she had seen many times before. “It is a rather stirring standard, I must say. The crimson field is meant to signify the blood of fallen crewmates, while the black longship represents a pirate vessel.”

“Appropriate,” she stated softly, having suspected as much when she first saw it.

“When the Garlean Empire marched upon Eorzea, we assembled beneath the Maelstrom’s standard, and our Grand Company was reborn. All answered the call, from the Knights of the Barracuda to Hylffyr’s Bloody Executioners, and together we met our would-be conquerors upon the field of Carteneau,” the Admiral christened, and like her counterparts in the other two nations, her eyes darkening as the memories of that day seemed to be flooding back to her. “That day, the world bore witness to the united strength of Limsa Lominsa! I swear to you— no army ever fought harder, or with more courage. Yet many of ours did not survive. Join me now in remembering those who fought in the name of freedom, and fell. May their souls be returned to the sea.”

She snapped into a salute, and the crowd did so as well, though Alphinaud again spoke in a murmur. “Freedom… Yes, they have always been rather fond of their freedom. Much as the beast tribes have. Small wonder — beneath the surface, one would struggle to tell them apart.”

“It has been five long years since the Calamity struck,” the Admiral continued on, after the moment of silence having been as short as the other two ceremonies before her. “Five long years of tireless rebuilding. Yet still the wounds of the Calamity fester and weep. But when I stand atop the Mizzenmast, and gaze upon our battered and broken vessel, I see an undying spirit. Did we not build all this from the wreck of the Galadion all those centuries ago? Shall we not do so again!”

That was true. Out of all the city states, this one seemed to be the most under weigh in terms of rebuilding… yet she knew better than anyone to think that they didn’t have their own share of problems. Especially since not only beast tribes and the Garlean stocking the borders, but they had their own pirates fighting amongst themselves.

The Admiral brought her arm down in a sweeping gesture as she said, “Yet there are those who would see this ship sink beneath the waves of the restless Rhotano. The Sahagin creep ashore seeking blood for their accursed god. While the mines of O’Ghomoro spew forth kobolds who push ever south, despoiling our lands as they go. These savage beast tribes will be the first waves to crash against our creaking hull. And behind them swells the grim tide of the Garlean Empire. Even now, the curs fly their flags within our borders. Doubt not but that they will be upon us ere long. We are well nigh surrounded. Yet there are those among us who would rather turn their swords against their crewmates than our cannons against our foes. How can we hope to repel our many enemies when mutiny breeds below deck?”

‘Twas a pirate’s nature. These freedom-loving curs weren’t above fighting against others to get what they wanted. After having dealt with her fair share of pirates, she could understand why they were facing so many difficulties with playing nicely with others. Especially since stuck on an island, and their neighbors are hating them on all sides.

Yet again, the Admiral raised up her fist.

“There is but one course left to us!” she shouted out in a strong voice, trying to rally them to her side, “One bearing that will bring us victory over the beast hordes and the Empire both, and see this ship safe to port. We must mend the rift the Calamity has reopened ‘twixt pirate and Maelstrom, and stand fast with our adventurer brothers against the coming tempest! Mark ye well: a crew without unity is no crew at all — ‘tis but a mass of drowned men. To me, then, brothers and sisters of the sea! Gather beneath the undying crimson standard and pledge me your strength, your
skill, your wisdom! And with the guidance of the Navigator, this great vessel of ours shall ride the waves till sea swallows all!”

Once again, this was a speech that was very well done. Not a hint of a lie yet not the complete truth either. It was then she realized what the problem was. The leaders were choosing to shine them in the best light while reminding them of their own problems. Wanting to inspire all willing hands to make it easier and to fight off any threat. Again, they did not speak any lies… more like half-truths… or perhaps not revealing all the troubles that they were facing and perhaps even responsible for.

But soon enough, with the ceremony now over, she let out a sigh and shook her head, her mind more torn than ever before. That was when she looked to Alphinaud and Alisaie once again, who had mixed expressions. Alphinaud was looking disappointedly amused by what he just heard, while Alisaie looked torn between disinterest and anger. But the three of them drew back as the pirates and citizens were leaving—all of them talking excitedly about what was just said.

“I’m starting to think that the gods are trying to tell me something with me continuing to run into you two,” Claire stated to them in amusement.

He smiled back, liking her slightly dry sense of humor as he said, without even bothering to ask her if she wished to hear what he thought, “As the Admiral mentioned in her address, Limsa Lominsa is plagued by two beast tribes. The first are the fish-like Sahagin, worshipers of the primal Leviathan. The second are the kobolds, who dwell beneath the earth, and take the primal Titan for their god. As if the beast tribes’ presence weren’t enough, the Garleans have also chosen to erect a fortress right in the Lominsans’ backyard,” he informed her, once more pleased that she was listening in to him without interruption.

Again, more primals. Why was it that she had never heard of them before now? She had heard of Leviathan—but she hadn’t understood what it was at the time—and this was also the first she believed she heard of Titan. But if these two were as large and as dangerous as Ifrit was it really made her wonder that if Eorzea had such creatures; why would any in their right minds come here?

“And that is to say naught of internal strife,” he added, “As a nation of pirates, there is no end to the blood feuds between the various factions. And while they fight amongst themselves, the Garleans whet their blades and watch. If the Lominsans are to have any hope of withstanding the Empire, they must first resolves their own affairs. Differences must be set aside, and the primal threat dealt with once and for all.”

In other words, they had the same problems as the other nations, but they had to contend with hatred on all sides. That wasn’t a good thing for anyone. Alphinaud paused there as he glanced back up to the crimson standard and sighed, “To this end, I expect that they will soon take decisive action against the beast tribes. Mark my words, the Maelstrom standard will be drenched a deeper shade of crimson ere long.”

She wasn’t sure which she liked less. The idea that more blood will be spilt soon or the disinterested way he said it. She observed him for a moment as she looked over his features. A rather delicate face with a slightly upturn nose… and the brightest shade of blue eyes she could remember seeing for a long time. Now that she was observing him, she couldn’t help but get this sensation of smug superiority that seemed to emit off him. She hadn’t noticed it before, but now that he was here giving his opinion, she could see it much more clearly.

She raised her eyebrows as he flashed as smile and finished, “That a capable adventurer like you would be a valuable addition to their crew is beyond question. But will you sail with the Admiral?”
She thought it all over; really not liking how he was talking like he already suspected her decision.

“We shall find out,” she answered calmly. “In either case, I thank you for all your words of wisdom up till now. I will think over everything you have said and I will make my decision then. I hope that we will meet again soon.”

She watched as he bowed politely and the two of them parted ways with her once again. She watched them go before she felt as if someone was watching her once again and looked up to the balcony. She supposed she shouldn’t be so surprised anymore… but she found the Admiral’s sharp eyes looking down at her.

The two observed each other for a moment before she watched the Admiral give a smile and nodded her head simply. Not saying a word, but acknowledging her presence and seemed to take comfort from it for some reason. But she nodded back in understanding before watching the Admiral leave the room… leaving her no choice but to do the same.

No sooner did she walk out of the room did she heard a strange pulsing noise in her ear. She stopped and reached up to her ear, taking a moment to figure out how it worked. As soon as she got it, she heard Minfilia’s voice echoing slightly in her ear.

“Claire, this is Minfilia. You are well, I hope?” she heard her ask, though without waiting to hear an answer, she added a little more hopefully, ‘Would I be correct in thinking that the final remembrance ceremony has now concluded?’

“Just a moment ago, in fact,” she replied.

‘A moment ago, you say? What a coincidence!’ Minfilia said, sounding greatly relieved, ‘Well, jesting aside, I trust you remember our guests from the Grand Companies?’

“I might have. Don’t tell me that you aren’t enjoying their presence?” Claire teased lightly and she smirked at the rather indignant noise at the other end.

‘Well, delighted though we are to have them here at the Waking Sands, it would not do to keep them in suspense any longer than necessary,’ Minfilia said with a thick voice, pausing only at the word ‘delighted’ before sounding urgent as she pleaded, ‘In short: hurry back!’

“I make no promises,” she answered and smirked as she hung up. Now, she knew that she could have taken the ferry back to Vesper Bay, but where was the fun in that? She liked to think of this as a little bit of revenge for them sending her out to face a primal.

She was well aware of how petty it was, but gods it felt good.

Still, she decided not to keep them waiting for too long and took the airship back to Ul’dah and began to trek back on her own, still testing out some of her newer weapons in the process. By the time that she finally returned to the Waking Sands, she had grown quite confident in her new skills of thaumaturgy and spearwork. In fact, she was wondering whether she should try her hands at a bow by the time that she passed Tataru and entered their HQ properly. When she finally returned to the solar, she found Minfilia looking close to having some sort of a breakdown. The look of relief that passed over her face couldn’t have been stated enough and she looked ready to throw herself at her in a hug.

Indeed, the three excitable guests couldn’t have looking happier when they saw her returning.

“Welcome back!” Minfilia said “Were the Grand Company leaders’ words as illuminating as you had hoped?”
Claire felt that she was lying when she nodded her head. But perhaps she guessed the internal conflict that was going on inside her for Minfilia seemed to nod in sympathy.

“Aye, each nation is beset with problems. I trust you see now why your services are in such demand. Would that there were more of you, Claire,” she asked. “In any case, I suppose we shan’t keep the officers waiting. Have you made your choice?”

Claire looked to the others and nodded, and the three officers stood straighter, waiting for her to approach her chosen.

In truth, Claire wasn’t a fan of any of them, for in each she could see a major problem that concerned her. It wasn’t really out of loyalty… nor did she think that there was a wrong answer in this case. In the end, she made up her mind and decided, not which one she believed in… but the one in which she could keep an eye on.

The Maelstrom officer’s eyes lit up when she approached him and he asked, while saluting, “How was the Admiral’s speech? Ah, but you need not explain—that you stand before me now is answer enough. You have resolved to join the Maelstrom, have you not?”

She nodded once and she could see the disappointment in the other officer’s faces.

“That’s the spirit, lass!” he cried, “With allies like you, how much stronger is our crew! Let us brave the seas together, friend!”

He then got straight down to business as he told her, “‘Tis on the upper decks, in case you have forgotten. I will send word to our personnel officer to expect you. The duties of a Maelstrom soldier can be both arduous and challenging, but I promise you: you will not regret this choice. May your passage be swift and your bearings sure.”

So she cast the Return Spell and her feet hit the familiar steps of Limsa Lominsa before returning to the Upper Decks, to where the command was. In truth, it was a place she had passed by many times before but never really gave it any thought as she went on her business. This was the first time she had ever had any reason to really enter the place other than just sheer curiosity.

Like the rest of Limsa, it was made of strong wood and iron built into the carven white stone, and connected by steel bridges to the rest of the city. As she entered, she saw a handful of people dressed in a similar crimson uniform, most standing behind a desk, while several of their red standards hung proudly. As she entered, she noticed how a handful of the officers and soldiers seemed to have guessed on who she was. Damn, word spread fast in Eorzea, didn’t it?

She merely kept her head down to avoid attention before she approached the desk, who glanced up when he saw her.

“Hail, adventurer,” the Storm Personnel Officer said, “What business have you at Maelstrom Command?”

She cleared her throat and said, “My name is Claire Faye. I believe you are expecting me?”

“Clare Faye!” he gasped, recognizing her name, “Aye, our recruitment sent word of your coming. It would be my honor to induct you into the ranks of the Maelstrom.” He then cleared his own throat rather nervously as he went on, “Now, before I can accept your oath, you must be made aware of several—”

Before he could finish, another came running into the room, with his eyes wide and panting hard. Unlike the others, who were dressed in red, he had the uniform of a private as he called, “Ser!” and
remembering to salute properly.

The officer was looking annoyed at this as he hissed, “What is it, Private? And this had better be important.”

“Sir!” he recited, “We’ve received a report from a lookout in lower La Noscea, sir! Imperial forces have fired upon a Highwind Skyways airship. The vessel is in a bad way, sir, and appears to be banking for an emergency landing in Cedarwood.”

“Cedarwood?” the officer questioned, “Damn it. We have no troops available in that area. The bulk of our infantry is bogged down on the coast, skirmishing with the fishbacks.”

He was looking both shocked and desperate as he began to look around, looking for an answer. Claire knew what was coming almost as soon as his eyes found hers.

“Faye—this is highly irregular, but I fear your first duty in service to the Maelstrom must needs be unofficial,” he said urgently, “If our man in lower La Noscea is correct, the airship will come down in territory crawling with imperial scouts. If there are any survivors, we must reach them before the Garleans do. Make haste to Cedarwood, locate the airship, and if any of its occupants are alive, make sure they come to no further harm. We’ll see about swearing you in upon your return.”

Already? She wasn’t even sworn in but they were already putting her to work? She was starting to think she should have chosen a different company. Still, she made her bed and had to lie in it.

So, she nodded and went running off, teleporting in midstep to Summerford Farms before she hit the ground running. Though she was not inducted properly into the Maelstrom, she knew what was expected of her.

She found the site quickly enough, she could see the ship even from a fair distance away. As she hurried, she could make out a few people dressed all in black… which wasn’t a good sign. She crept silently as she tried to get a good look at the situation. That was when she realized she wasn’t the only one… for crouching behind a tree was a Roegadyn in a bright blue uniform. It was hard to tell, but he didn’t look like one of the Imperials—most likely one of the passengers on the crashed ship. She hurried over to him, crouching down next to him.

He jumped when he saw her there, his foot accidentally cracking a branch in two. Though quiet, it was loud enough to get the Imperial’s attention. They spun about, their weapons halfway drawn, but thankfully a stray dodo chose that moment to hurry on passed them. The Imperials went back to examining the crashed ship as she and the Roegadyn let out sighs at that.

The Roegadyn then glanced at her before whispering, “An adventurer!? What’re you doing out here? No, wait—” He gestured slightly, knowing that it wasn’t safe to talk here. “Let’s find some cover first…”

So they moved out from behind the tree, taking care to run behind the Imperials, who were so focused on the ship they slipped past unnoticed. That was where they found another larger tree a safe distance away where they could still watch what was going on without worrying as much about being spotted.

Once they caught their breath, she told him that the Maelstrom Command sent her to help them. But instead of looking reassured, he looked suspicious and demanded, “Maelstrom Command sent you? How do I know you’re not an Imperial spy? You don’t even have a uniform!”

He then held up his fists, ready to fight and she bit back the retort of: “If I was a spy, why would I
be here helping you instead of those armored thugs behind us?”

Before his loud voice gave them away, other figures suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Seriously? She thought that there weren’t any troops to spare but suddenly they got a Lieutenant and a few privates? Oh, well. At least they should be able to clear this misunderstanding up.

“Be at ease, sir,” the Lieutenant soothed when the Roegadyn spun to look at him, “We are of the Maelstrom. You’re a Garlond Ironworks engineer, yes? One of our lookouts reported the attack on your craft—we’re here to rescue you.” He then added to her, “You must be Faye. Good work on reaching our friend here before the Imperials.”

She nodded back as the engineer seemed to gulp. While the other three went off to examine the situation, she looked to the Roegadyn ‘Ironworks’ engineer, who was now looking embarrassed and was adjusting his goggles in a way that clearly suggested that he was wishing he kept his mouth shut.

But she didn’t say a word as they crouched down with the others and watched how the Imperials were speaking to each other. They were too far away to make out the words, but something seemed to have caught their attention.

“Scouting party from Castrum Occidens, I’d say,” the Storm Lieutenant reasoned after a few minutes of silence, “Seems they want your ship, engineer.”

Suddenly, Claire spotted what it was that the Imperials were pointing at. A small head was just sticking out from over the railing of the ship and she realized that there was someone onboard. Something the engineer realized as well.

“Wedge!” he growled out fretfully before pleading, “You have to help him! That fool of a Lalafell was hiding inside the Tiny Bronco!”

“The Tiny Bronco?” the Lieutenant repeated in surprise, “Isn’t that the new design people have been whispering about?”

“It’s the first airship we’ve built since the Calamity — the first since Master Garlond…well, since he went missing,” the engineer said, steering the topic from less grim tones. “After years of work, she was finally ready for her first test flight. And she was soaring, she really was — till those bastards blasted her out of the sky!”

So that was what happened. From what she could tell, it was just the two engineers and after they were fired upon, they had no choice but to make an emergency landing here. Either this engineer managed to escape before it landed, or went to scout the situation, but he had been lucky enough to get away. The other, however, was likely heading back to the Garleans if they didn’t hurry.

“All right, pay attention,” the Lieutenant said as he understood the situation and got to his feet. “We’re going to hit these imperials hard and fast. If they want a souvenir from Eorzea, they can have a knife in the gut, but they’re not getting that ship. Oh, and…” he added as if it was just a secondary thought, “…don’t forget to save the Lalafell.”

He then glanced at her and asked, “What say you, Faye? Ready to give those curs a hiding?”

Like hell she was going to go home now and nodded before they readied to charge out.

“Like a tidal wave, lads!” the Lieutenant cried, pulling his axe down and gripping the shaft expertly, “Charge!”
They came so hard and fast that the Imperials didn’t see them coming. With the element of surprise on their side, they were able to go running into the fray and were more than able to deal with the Imperials before they even knew what hit them.

In fact, it was almost too easy at this point. Even when they summoned up a Magitek Vanguard to fight for them, clanking and hissing as it towered over their heads. The engineer was calling out some helpful bits of advice on how to avoid it as she went to attacking the metal frame, looking for a weakness. She soon spotted it at the joints, realizing that she could get her lance in between their very easily and she went all out on it while making sure that it did damage. Over and over, she managed to attack it’s weak points until the joints could no longer move and she damaged the wiring enough that it fell to the ground, sparking and smoking in the process.

“Biggs!”

She jumped and looked up to the ship to see the small Lalafell leaping from the deck, dressed in the same style of clothing as the Roegadyn engineer. She wondered who he was talking to for a moment until he stopped running and was right in front of the same engineer, panting for air with the air of greatest liberation.

“Wedge!” the engineer—Biggs—said crossly like a parent who was telling his misbehaving child to calm down. “You shouldn’t have stayed with the ship!”

Yet Wedge didn’t seem to take notice of his scolding as he just sighed and muttered, “Th-That was a close one!”

“Too damn close,” Biggs agreed, now satisfied that his friend was alright, and turned his attention back to the airship. “So…how’s she look, anyway?”

Wedge looked back at the ship as well as he confessed, “The auxiliary propeller is a dead loss, but I think we can wring enough thrust from the main propeller to get us airborne.”

Biggs nodded in understanding before he told the rest of them, “A few minor modifications and we should be able to fly the Tiny Bronco home.”

But what if the Imperials come back?

Her question was answered almost right away when the lieutenant reassured them, “We’ll stand watch until the ship is ready to take off. The Imperials will come looking for their scouts eventually, but I doubt they’ll get here for a good while yet.” She was about to sit down and make herself comfortable when he added to her, “Faye—you’re free to return to Maelstrom Command and complete your induction. Ordinarily, I’d ask you to stay, but I think that we’d all feel better knowing an adventurer of your ability was safely sworn in and ready for the next mission! Rest assured, I’ll inform Command of the part you played today.”

Well, if she really wasn’t needed here anymore?

As she nodded, Biggs began to chuckle a little sheepishly and mumbled, scratching the back of his head, “I, um…just wanted to say sorry… You know, for calling you an Imperial spy and all that… Got that one wrong, didn’t I!?”

She merely smiled back at him, showing that there were no hard feelings as he grinned and said properly, “Seriously, though, if it hadn’t been for you and the Maelstrom lads there, we’d be chained up in a dungeon by now. I’m in your debt, friend — we both are.” When Wedge didn’t say anything, he glared down at him until the Lalafell realized he was being rude.
“Thank you!” He piped. “We’re very grateful!”

“I’m glad to help,” she smiled at them, “You take care.”

She waved as they energetically waved back, allowing her to return to the city. No sooner did she step into Maelstrom Command were all eyes on her.

“Welcome back, Faye,” the personnel officer said, “I just heard the report. …I must admit, I had my doubts at first, but it seems the stories about you are true.”

Sadly, that seemed to be the case.

“Now, speaking of your induction…” the officer went on. “Let us start afresh, shall we?”

No sooner did he say that did two other officers entered behind him and stood at attention, all three saluting, a gesture she copied as they readied themselves to give her an introduction.

“You are welcome here, Claire Faye. That such a well-respected adventurer would choose to join our ranks is most heartening,” the officer said to her respectfully, “Before you swear your allegiance to us, however, it is only right that I tell you exactly what it is that you will be joining. A Grand Company is more than simply a collection of soldiers. It is an all-encompassing organization which draws upon the resources of an entire city-state to form a united military force capable to standing against a nation’s deadliest enemies. We of the Maelstrom are charged with meeting the threats posed by the primals and the Garlean Empire, and solving the many problems caused by the Calamity. Every man and woman who serves under our colors has a role to play in keeping the great warship that is Limsa Lominsa afloat, and on whatever heading Chief Admiral Merlwyb Bloefhiswyn sees fit to set. As part of this grand vessel’s crew, you will be expected to take your turn at the oars—for the winds do not look favorable, lass, and strength of arm may be all that sees us safe to port.”

If nothing else, Lominsans were fond of using terms you would use out at sea. She found it strangely endearing.

“If I’ve lost you with talk of ship and oar, let me put it another way: a Maelstrom soldier labors till her last breath, fights till her last drop of blood,” the officer added, misinterpreting her silence. “We give our all in service to this nation, and no less is expected of you.” He then cleared his throat and said with all seriousness, “Faye—it is customary for new recruits to swear an oath of their own choosing upon entering the Maelstrom’s ranks. Is there aught you’d like to say?”

There were many things she could have said. Such as: You have my sword till sea swallows all! Or… What skill I have are yours, till sea swallows all! Even something like… I will follow the Admiral to the very bottom of the abyss!”

But she had no words to say that could sound true to her. In all honesty, she was still uncertain if what she was doing was the right thing or if she had picked the right path. She had never planned on joining some Company like this, nor could she say that she was looking forward to any future missions that they had for her.

Yet, it didn’t seem that the officers were upset by her silence, thinking that she was overwhelmed by everything else.

“Claire Faye, I hereby assign you the rank of Storm Private Third Class,” he said formally, “You are now officially a soldier of the Maelstrom. Welcome aboard, Private. May you serve Limsa Lominsa well, till sea swallows all.”
As they saluted her, the other soldiers in the hall all burst into loud applause, welcoming her into the ranks with nothing short of cheers.

She could only force a smile as she wondered what she was to do now. Yet, at that moment, her linkpearl pulsed in her ear and she stopped to listen.

‘Can you hear me, Claire? This is Minfilia,’ Minfilia’s voice said, ‘An officer of the Maelstrom contacted me with news of your successful enlistment. My congratulations, Private Faye!’

Well, that was quick. She was starting to think that they had eyes on her at every moment.

‘Now, I have no doubt that you are well in need of a break from adventuring, having been out and about Eorzea these past days,’ she went on, ‘But I would ask you to pay a visit to Vesper Bay, first. Pray return to the Waking Sands at your earliest convenience. There are some friends here whom I would very much like you to meet. We shall be waiting!’

Just when she thought that she was going to have a break… something new pops up. She wasn’t sure if her timing was bad or Minfilia’s was perfect in this case. Still, she better go and see what was going on and she was curious to see who these new friends were. This time, she decided merely to take the ferry over to Vesper Bay, and was there in no time at all. When she entered the solar, she could see that it wasn’t just Minfilia, but the other Scions as well. She paused, looking around for a moment, wondering that they were going to be asking her to leave the Scions now that she was with the Maelstrom.

But such thoughts were pushed out of her mind when they all smiled at the sight of her.

“Ah, Claire, it seems you wasted no time putting your skills to work!” Minfilia said fondly, surprising her. Seriously, how do they know that? It was barely even a bell before?

Minfilia chuckled at her stunned expression and explained, “How do I know? Why, the recruitment officer called to regale me with the tale of your heroics. The pride in his voice was palpable! We Scions are fortunate to have you with us, Claire.”

Who knew officers were such gossipers?

“Now, when last we spoke, I said that I wanted you to meet some friends, did I not?” She laughed. “Well, I neglected to mention that you have already met. Tataru— please show them in.”

Why did it feel that everyone knew something she didn’t? She turned to the door, now completely at a loss… only for her eyes to wide in recognition. For walking in were a pair of faces that she had met just a short time ago… Biggs and Wedge!

What a small world.

Biggs laughed out loud at their introduction and grinned at her as he said blushingly, “Thanks again for getting us out of that mess. We owe you our lives. But though you know our names, let’s properly introduce ourselves, shall we? I’m Biggs.”

“A-And I’m…I’m…” Wedge began, but seemed either too excited or embarrassed to be here and ended up stuttering.

“Gods, man!” Biggs barked exasperatedly, “Spit it out, will you!”

“W-Wedge, at your service!” Wedge yelped, bowing and nearly falling over. The room began to laugh at the pair’s antics.
“I am pleased to say that Biggs and Wedge will be staying with us for a while,” Minfilia announced to them all, “Magitek-driven contraptions such as airships grow ever more vital to the city-states of Eorzea. As a neutral party, it was judged that we Scions should serve as the keepers of this technology. Of course, for this we needed the knowledge of experts. And so we requested the assistance of Garlond Ironworks, who very kindly sent us two of their finest engineers.”

She then turned back to the two engineers and finished proudly, “And so our happy family continues to grow. On behalf of the Scions, I bid you welcome to the Waking Sands!”

Another round of applause broke out and the other Scions went up to greet the pair, their voices soon filling up the room so that it was hard to tell who was speaking first. But as she watched, Claire heard Minfilia turn to her.

“How every soul here, I love Eorzea,” she said and Claire looked up, “And I count myself blessed to have been given this chance to stand with you all and fight for the future of the realm. Never have I known such fulfillment — such happiness.”

Happiness… it had been so long now since she had known such a joy. How she envied her.
Sylph-management

Chapter Summary

With her first primal having been slain, our young adventurer is ready with her next mission. To try and find peace between the people of Gridania and the Sylphs. A plant-like race of beastment. Things don’t start off nearly as well as anyone had hoped, yet through perseverance and patience, Claire is making progress. Yet with the Sylph elder now missing, she must continue her adventures all over the Shroud to find him.

After she joined the Maelstrom, things had calmed down for Claire for a time. Well, in one sense, at least. Her new duties did have her assisting her new Grand Company, which barely had time for much else; though aside from some few missions she was sent on, she was able to take it easy for the time being, which she was grateful for.

She would visit the Waking Sands and see the others all interact with each other. Yda and Papalymo spent most of their time bickering while Urianger almost always had his nose buried in a tome before leaving with some cryptic messages that left her feeling confused and feeling as if she had just missed something important—though she knew not what. Y’shtola came and went, not really one for standing around and waiting for something to do. Apparently there were hints of trouble starting to brew around La Noscea, and as such, had her attention divided. As for Thancred, he hardly seemed to be at the Waking Sands—apparently he was just given a very special new assignment which had him leaving for long periods of time. The few times she did see him, however, he made an effort to be extremely courteous… to the brink of becoming shamelessly flirty with her.

The only one who always seemed to be here, was Minfilia, whom was often cloistered within the solar, pouring over an endless mountain of paperwork. Almost as much paperwork as the friendly Lalafell Tataru had, who always greeted her with a big smile, whenever she entered. On this day, Claire went to the solar to see her, if looking for something to do if nothing else, only to be told that there was another mission for her.

As soon as she was informed of this, the other Scions all joined them in the solar as they began to explain what they needed her to do now.

“Now, setting aside the pleasantries… We have a favor to ask of you,” Minfilia stated kindly, and Claire could sense that now familiar foreboding feeling coming. She turned towards Urianger, hovering as always in his corner of the solar. “Have the documents arrived?”

Oh, she really hoped that it wasn’t going to be paperwork. She almost rather go out and fight Ifrit again if it was.

Thankfully, when Urianger handed over a few sheets of parchment to her, Minfilia turned back to her and explained, “We have conducted a study at the behest of the Order of the Twin Adder.”

Claire tilted her head, wondering what they were talking about, before Minfilia turned to the other Scions and finished, “Papalymo, Yda — a synopsis, if you would.”

Claire looked behind her, to see Papalymo clear his throat and explained, “Our task was to survey
the behavior of the sylphs, a beast tribe indigenous to the Twelveswood.”

Sylphs? She had never heard of anything like them before. Perhaps some of her confusion appeared on her face, for Yda added, “Oh, how to describe them… They look like… gysahl greens? Floating ones! That worship the primal Ramuh.”

Another primal? Oh, she really didn’t like that thought. One was enough for her. She hated to think of what this ‘Ramuh’ would look like and how strong he was?

Papalymo then explained, “Though technically a ‘beast tribe’, sylphs are blessed with a comparatively personable demeanor, conducive to peaceful communication.”

Well, she couldn’t deny she felt a little better at that news. If these Sylphs were more open to peace, then the odds of them summoning Ramuh should be pretty slim. At least, compared to the more warrior Amal’jaa anyway.

“Offering us an invaluable opportunity to lean what the beast tribes know of the primals,” Minfilia added, and Claire looked back to her.

“While Ramuh’s existence is well documented, the sylphs do not — or perhaps, can not – summon the primal any longer, insofar as can be ascertained,” Papalymo explained with a hint of concern, “Until such time as we know…it would be unwise to assume that the threat posed by the primal has passed.”

“Which leaves Gridania with the added worry of not knowing what they should be worrying about! Yda finished up for them all.

Papalymo nodded as he folded his arms, informing her, “In that regard, they are hardly alone. What we can say with absolute certainty is that Gridania has its hands full fending off Garuda. Who, I need hardly remind you, is among the most savage and terrible of all known primals.”

News to her. She never even heard of Garuda. But if she was supposed to be the most savage of all known primals, this didn’t sound like a foe she would want to meet.

“In short,” Minfilia concluded. “It is essential that we approach the sylphs in as diplomatic a manner as possible. Words and actions can be misconstrued. The only sure way to communicate our intentions is the Echo. Winning the sylphs’ favor may well bring us a step closer to mitigating the threat of the primals. I know I do not have to ask, but will you help us?”

She wasn’t sure she liked this plan. But still, if there was a chance she could solve it without reducing to violence, she saw no reason why she couldn’t help. Besides, she was very curious to see these Sylphs. She nodded, where Minfilia beamed in response.

“Lovely,” Thancred added with a grin. “Well, as much as I’d like to help, I’m afraid I would be of little use to anyone in Gridania. A veritable babe in the woods. Yda and Papalymo, however, should be able to see the forest for the trees, as it were. Is that not so, Minfilia?”

“Indeed,” Minfilia said, still smiling as she turned to Yda and asked, “You are willing?”

“Leave it to me!” Yda chirped, patting her chest in reassurance.

“Us, Yda,” Papalymo added, “Us!”

And so their plans were made. They were to leave as soon as the sun rose tomorrow, and so they were all given rooms to rest in for the night. But Claire found sleep coming to her very difficult to
*Later that day*

It was early in the afternoon when they arrived in Gridania, with Yda happily leading the way through Gridania. But no sooner did they walk past the aetheryte, did Yda say something to her partner that made the two fall behind as they broke into another argument. Papalymo pushed Claire forward, telling her not to pay attention to how immature Yda could be, which resulted in Yda calling him short know-it-all and he turned back to scold her.

Claire rolled her eyes as she continued on towards the Adders’ Nest, entering the shaded area and away from the hot sun as she cast her gaze around for this Commander she was supposed to be meeting.

The strange thing was that he seemed to be talking to himself. At least, that was the impression she got as she approached and heard him whispering, “We know far too little of the sylphs to lay any worthwhile plans. We must call upon the Scions once more if we are to—”

He then looked up and jumped when he noticed her standing there.

“Ah, beg pardons,” he said kindly, saluting and clearing his throat so that he was more professional. “’Tis a terrible habit of mine to think aloud. But tell me, what brings you to the Adders’ Nest?”

Claire made to open her mouth to explain, but she was spared the effort when she heard Yda’s voice call, “Hello, Commander Heuloix!”

The two seemed to have wrapped up their argument and caught up in time for Commander Heuloix to sigh in relief at the sight.

“Ah, Yda and Papalymo, always a pleasure to see the two of you,” he said graciously, “My men have told me you quest for the Scions of late.”

“Quite so, Commander,” Papalymo confirmed for them. “A little bird told us that the Twin Adder was in need of our adventuring prowess.”

“Aye, your little bird sings true,” the commander confessed with a rather grim chuckle, “No doubt you’ve heard that we’re investigating the sylphs — that curious beast tribe that calls the depths of the Twelveswood home. The sylphs are, for the most part, a peaceable bunch — much to the delight of the Elder Seedseer, who has no desire to see her people embroiled in yet another fruitless war.”

That was certainly a relief, especially since she was aware of the Ixali causing trouble on their borders across the Twelveswood. She wouldn’t want to imagine having to fight off two different beast tribes at the same time.

“The Twin Adder is of the same mind, and ‘tis precisely for this reason that the sylphs’ relation to the primal Ramuh has raised a flag of warning amongst our ranks,” the commander went on seriously, “Friendly as they may appear, beastmen will be beastmen. Should there be even a sliver of a chance that the summoning of the primal might disturb the balance between Gridania and the sylphic tribes, it is a possibility we cannot ignore.”

“Better to be safe than sorry, indeed,” Papalymo agreed with a nod as Commander Heuloix sighed.

“Do we strike at Ramuh, or leave the sylphs to their own ways?” he asked, “That is the question,
yet I find myself lacking ample knowledge to arrive at an answer. Opinions abound within Gridania, but to listen only to one’s own is among the greatest mistake a commander can make. I would hear from the other side — the sylphs themselves — and seek an impartial party to serve as my liaison. That is where you Scions come in.”

They clearly didn’t want to risk a fight with the Sylphs, especially if there was no need to. But they couldn’t ignore the thought of a primal being summoned. After her first run-in with a primal, she could understand their concerns perfectly.

“The sylphs of Little Solace remain untempered, and have held many a productive dialogue with our people,” Commander Heuloix ended, “I would hear their candid thoughts on their tempered brethren. That said, I urge you to exercise caution. Sylphic tradition and etiquette bear little resemblance to our own. It would not do to have any cross-cultural faux pas get in the way of a productive parley. En route to Little Solace, you will come upon the Hawthorne Hut. Our officer stationed there can enlighten you as to how to win the sylphs’ favor. May your expedition be a worthwhile one.”

And that, as they say, was that. She left with Yda and Papalymo, who went with her as far as the pier, explaining that they would catch up as soon as they had a quick word with the Elder Seedseer to see if there was anything else she could tell them.

Claire had only explored the borders of the East Shroud before, never having much time to have explored all of it. But as soon as she disembarked Sweetbloom Pier, she could all but smell the flowers that grew in this area.

She did what was suggested and continued on east until she came to the Honey Yard, where the woman who was in charge of the bees and hives, was very kind and even offered a small jar of honey for the Serpent Officer stationed at the Hawthorne Hut. After continuing on for a time, she reached the small hut that was built up upon a hill that overlooked the area. It was here that she met with Rolfe, a local of this area, and gave advice on the best way to approach the Sylphs.

A merry, prank-loving race, they were ordinarily friendly towards people, albeit a bit shy to mankind. But he instructed her on to bring a gift for them, in the form of milkroot—the roots of an Ochu. Claire was baffled by such an idea, yet Rolfe seemed to know what he was talking about and she set off to find some. Apparently by chewing it, causes the sylphs to go into a drunk-like state… though how they were able to stand the smell, she wasn’t sure. It was truly foul to have to dig around the carcass of the dead Ochu and pull out the thick, rubbery roots until she had enough to fill the box she brought with her.

Shivering slightly from the ghastly feeling of the slimy roots on her hands, she returned to the Hut, where Rolfe was happy to seal it up in a package for her so that she wouldn’t have to worry about the smell as she was delivering it.

That was also where Amelain, the Serpent Officer, passed to her a letter from the Seedseer herself, and instructed to hand it only to the Sylph Elder. She understood what was being asked of her, and carefully tucked the letter away inside her bag before she took the parcel from Rolfe, who had one last bit of advice when greeting the sylphs, before sending her on her way.

She left the hut and continued on towards the northeast… told that she would recognize Little Solace when she saw it. And indeed, she did. For just as she reached one of the deeper parts of the woods, she could make out the flash of color up ahead. As she hurried, she soon came upon the brightly colored tents and awnings that hung from the trees, little lanterns made of woven plants and flowers, and gently woven gates at the entrance where she saw…?
That had to be a Sylph standing guard. It was certainly tiny, and the way that Yda had described them earlier like floating gysahl greens wasn’t as exaggerated as she first thought. They reminded her of delicate dolls wrapped in vibrant leaves, with petal-like faces and beetle-black eyes looking on.

She paused at the gates where the Sylph spotted her and watched on for a moment before giving a tiny wave and allow her to pass, although she could tell that it was watching her suspiciously as she entered the camp and looked around to find the Sylph named Komuxio.

There were a handful of people walking about, but most Sylphs around her, and she had to admit that they all looked pretty much the same to her. She frowned, wondering what it was that she was supposed to do before she began to ask around for the elder.

Most of them were looking at her darkly, not quite sure what to make of this newcomer, but they didn’t tell her to go away or anything like that, and instead directed her to a large tent where another Sylph was hovering outside it.

“Excuse me? Is your name Komuxio?” Claire asked, and he turned to look at her, his head tilted and a frown on his little face, apparently surprised that she knew his name.

“Walking one is not familiar to this one,” he spoke, sounding suspicious as he looked over her. “This one does not trust strange walking one. Strange dancing ones might be a different story, but this one expects no such thing. Walking one should go home, and leave this one be.”

She remembered too late what Rolfe had instructed to her before, how Sylphs liked to greet each other by dancing. Feeling ridiculous, she began to move about as gracefully as she knew how. While she had learned a handful of new dances since coming to Eorzea, she felt it better not to over complicate things and made her movements simple and easy.

The sylph blinked before he began to giggle at how funny she must undoubtedly look. But she found herself smiling along with him as Komuxio clapped his tiny hands together as he said much more warmly, “This one would welcome walking one who moves like these ones. If walking one would talk to this one, this one will answer. This one is a busy one, so walking one should speak with quick tongue.”

Claire nodded before handing over the container of milkroot—where the smell was beginning to seep through the wrapped parcel. She could feel her nose wrinkling at the odor, but Komuxio couldn’t have looked more thrilled as he took it from her and gasped in delight.

“Walking one would bring gift to this one? Walking one is most kind,” he said before opening it and seeing just how much milkroot there was inside. “Walking one brings milkroot! Milkroot fills this one with great joy! This one gives thanks. Gives many, many thanks.”

“You are welcome,” she said as she also pulled out the message, which got Komuxio’s attention when he spotted the thick parchment between her fingers.

“Walking one carries message for elder one?” he asked curiously.

Claire nodded, still smiling as she held up the letter so that Komuxio could not miss the Elder Seedseer’s seal upon the envelope.

Komuxio looked ready to reach out and take it before Claire pulled it away, trying to explain that she was ordered to deliver it to the Sylph elder.

“This one will deliver the message to elder one,” he squeaked, “Walking one should not worry.”
There was definitely something in Komuxio’s voice that made her pause. She wasn’t entirely sure what it was, but it was almost as if he was determined to bring this conversation away from their elder as soon as possible. She made to open her mouth and ask if there was something wrong when she heard the loud footsteps of Yda right behind her. She looked up to see that the two of them had just arrived and were waving at her happily.

Claire could see the confusion in Komuxio’s face out of the corner of her eye before his eyes became very dark and stormy. Suddenly realizing that introducing him to so many strangers at once wasn’t the smart move, she made to wave them away, but Yda was already speaking.

“Hello there!” she said brightly, “We’re envoys from Gridania, and we’re here to treat with your people!”

“Aye,” Papalymo said, not noticing the sudden rise in tension either, “We come to pay our respects to your elder, and to learn from him more of your Lord Ramuh.”

Claire almost felt the need to cry at how oblivious the two of them were here. Komuxio, however, sounded outrage as he demanded, “Who are these ones? These walking ones come from Gridania? Walking one became a dancing one and brought milkroot, but walking one trick this one! This one does not like tricks!”

She looked back, trying to quickly think of something to salvage the situation, but he just pointed wildly to the front gates of Little Solace as he ordered, “This one will speak no more. Elder one is busy. Walking ones should go home.”

“G-Go home, you say!?” Yda cried out bewildered, “But the sylphs of Little Solace have always welcomed Gridanian envoys with open wings!”

“The letter carried by Claire here is an oath of peace penned by the Elder Seedseer herself!” Papalymo protested, trying to stop this meeting going up in smoke, “Still you would refuse us?”

But Komuxio just shook his head and refused to listen as he snapped, “This one’s reasons are no business of walking ones. Elder one has no words for Gridania. Walking ones waste every one’s time.”

He then turned away and refused to listen to anything else they had to say. With no other choice, the three of them retreated a short distance away to discuss their next plan.

“Well, I never!” Yda grumbled at their predicament, “Turned away at the gates! Whatever did we do to deserve such a rude welcome? Was Claire’s jig insufficiently jiggy?”

She threw her a dark look, offended that she was blaming her for this.

“Everything was going well until you showed up,” Claire pointed out coolly, feeling a muscle going in her forehead at the thought, “So I would say it’s more your fault.”

“Alright,” Papalymo spoke up before Yda could retorted, “I’m as baffled as you two, but something tells me recent events have our erstwhile fluttery friends feeling uncommonly wary. It would seem that we’ve no choice but to ask around and see how we might earn their trust.”

For the next hour, she did her best to ask around the village to find some way of earning the Sylph’s trust. Papalymo was more helpful in his suggestion in assisting the residents of Little Solace with anything at all. Anything she could do to help, she should try and see if that would endear her to them. Yda’s suggestion was very simple… since she went to all the trouble to learn the dance for the Sylphs, she should use it to try and ‘bring the two sides together’. Of course,
when she offered for Yda to join in, she made the rather pathetic excuse of having ‘leg cramps’ and that she should continue on without her.

“Are you sure you aren’t just lazy?” she asked, causing Yda to splutter indigently at such a thought before she went off. But Claire just rolled her eyes, rather annoyed with the girl for the time being as she began to dance for the inhabitants of Little Solace. The results were more surprising than she thought that they would be, in that they all were rather taken with her dance and already were warming up to her.

But Komuxio wasn’t at all impressed with it. Well, she supposed that she shouldn’t expect this to be easy.

So rather than try to force her presence on him, when she was clearly not wanted, she decided going around to each of the Sylphs in Little Solace, offering aid and succor whenever she could. From recovering lost items and returning them to their rightful owners, to exterminating several beasts that had proven to be a danger to these sweet creatures; she found ways to keep herself busy.

After speaking with a Hearer, she had learned that brownie brushes, these strange mushrooms, were used by the Sylphs, but were having a hard time trying to collect them as of late with so many creatures stalking them. So, she took it upon herself to collect as many as she could find and to slay a handful of the monsters so that they have less to worry about.

When she returned, she cautiously approached Komuxio, who glared at her; as if he couldn’t believe that she hadn’t let yet.

“Dancing one is still here? Dancing one can dance all day — this one’s trust is not so easily earned,” he warned.

She only smiled kindly as she revealed the mushrooms, and she saw how Komuxio blinked in surprise, cautiously drifting a little closer and looking at the mushrooms.

“Dancing one brings brownie brushes for this one? This one can dye thread once more. This one is pleased,” he said as he gathered up the small fungi and looked at it with a new twinkle in his dark eyes.

She then smiled as she added that they shouldn’t have to worry about some of the creatures she took the liberty of slaying for them and she could see the startled perplexity.

“Dancing one is kind…” he said softly, unable to find anything else to say, “Too kind.”

“I know that you don’t trust me,” she told him, “And I don’t blame you. But we just want to talk. Can you believe that much?”

She watched as Komuxio fluttered there for a long moment as he thought over her words. Finally, he sighed and confessed, “Many walking ones come to these ones’ abode, but few are friendly like dancing one. Perhaps this one was wrong not to trust dancing one, after all.”

She smiled a little more as she nodded, wanting to assist in any way she could, having grown fond of these strange creatures despite the rather cold introduction. She continued to remain with the Sylphs for the next several days, continuing to help them with small matters and defending the village from creatures who would stalk their borders. Slowly, but surely, she was starting to see the Sylphs coming around and growing more to accept her.

Yda and Papalymo were both trying to work as well, but with such conflicting views, it almost felt like they were just there in the background and not really needed here.
“I don’t get it,” Claire heard Yda say once after she brought back some spindles of thread for a Sylph who had dropped it earlier when she fled from a wild beast. She had just watched the Sylph spin about in the air in a joyful dance when she heard Yda continuing to complain, “No matter how hard I try, the Sylphs don’t want to talk to me, but they talk to her?”

“Maybe because she’s not making a nuisance of herself?” Papalymo pointed out annoyed, which caused another spurt of indigent cries.

That much was true though. Despite their good intentions, the other two were having a much harder time trying to speak with the Sylphs than she was. The Sylphs seem much more reassured by Claire’s quiet nature than Papalymo’s stern one and Yda’s loud and boisterous one. She worked with that, continuing to listen to the citizens of Little Solace’s woes until just about every Sylph here seemed to know her personally.

It was long, hard work… but it paid off in the end. The entire time she spent there, she could feel Komuxio watching her every move. Despite bringing the mushrooms and the slaying of beasts as a peace offering, Komuxio seemed to be extremely anxious about her presence here. After several days of this hard work, however, it seemed that he had finally came to believe that she had nothing but the best of intentions for them, and he called her over.

“Again this one asks dancing one for forgiveness,” Komuxio asked rather humbly this time as he played with the helm of his leafy attire. “These ones have many troubles since walking ones last came to our abode. This one must be careful. Always careful. But dancing one is not like other walking ones. This one can trust dancing one. This one would ask dancing one for help.”

She nodded and answered, “I would… or rather, this one would be happy to help.”

It seemed that Komuxio liked her answer and give a little giggle before he leaned in close to her ear and whispered, a little more grave, “Strange walking ones with bodies of steel come to the home of these ones. This one thinks steel ones come from Empire. Where Empire goes, many living ones become dead ones. Trees fall and bushes burn. These ones’ home is in danger. Danger!”

Strange walking ones from the Empire? The Garlean Empire? She was aware of the steel wall at the borders of Gridania and of Ala Mhigo just a stone’s throw away. That ugly giant wall that cut right through the East Shroud stood high over them, and when the sun rose, she could see the black shadows cast by those dark spies stretch across the land like the bars of some terrible caged monster.

She never really gave much thought to the wall though, but now that she did, she realized just how close they were to the Empire and that the idea that they were seen stalking about the East Shroud shouldn’t come as a surprise to her.

“This one begs of dancing one to help this one know more,” Komuxio said, “Dancing one is friends with these ones and walking ones, yes? Dancing one must speak to these ones here and walking ones in hut-house and find out more.” His large black eyes were wide and fully of anxiety and she nodded back in understanding, which seemed to bring some relief to him. “This one has bad feeling. This one fears steel ones are after something. But this one should speak no more. Go, dancing one. This one depends on kindness of dancing one.”

So she did what she was asked; leaving the tents of Little Solace behind as she headed first towards the Hawthorne Hut, knowing that they were the best people to tell her more of the comings and goings of the shroud. If there was any truth of the Garleans starting to tread where they weren’t welcomed, they would know it.
After speaking with a handful of people, she came to agree with Komuxio’s justified fears. Most of the people she spoke to confirmed that they had at least heard of sightings of these strange armored men walking about, seemingly lugging crates. This all but confirmed for her that these Garleans were up to something, but had no guesses as to what they could be planning. Still, she returned to Little Solace to inform Komuxio what was going on.

When she explained what she found out, she could see the fear in Komuxio’s face.

“This one sees,” he said anxiously, “Steel walking ones come from Empire. Carry boxes, and go walking deep, deep through trees. As this one thought! Steel walking ones are up to nasty, no-good things. This one knows forest well. Steel walking ones try to hide, but this one will find them.” He gave it a little thought before asking, “This one would borrow dancing one’s map.”

She quickly pulled out her own map that she had made herself when she first came to the East Shroud, and she watched as he looked over it.

“This one makes mark — right here!” he said, marking a spot on the map to a location a little further south from here, and she looked over it as he finished, “This is where steel ones hide, this one knows. Dancing one will go looking for steel ones, yes?”

So off she went again. She began to make her way over some of the rotten wood of an old stump as she cast her gaze around. She looked for a few minutes, but so far found little to nothing to suggest something wrong. At least, until she caught the sight of something just behind a tree up ahead.

When she went to investigate, she stopped dead when she found several crates all stacked, one on top of the other, and leaning up against the tree. She frowned heavily as she approached, running her hand over the crates… at least until she heard a shout and turned in time to see several men dressed in thick, black armor come charging at her. She ducked down before ramming her spear upwards and just under a weak point of their armor and brought the first one down easily. The others soon followed suit as she began to look through the crates. She frowned, not finding anything other than some food supplies and rocks.

That was when her hand brushed against a piece of paper and she paused for a moment before pulling it out. Curious, she looked over it before heading back with what she found to show to Komuxio—who was anxiously waiting for her return.

“Dancing one is back! This one breathes sigh of relief,” he said before tilting his head slightly when he saw the rolled up scroll. “Dancing one found something!”

She nodded and unrolled it so that she could hold it out for him to look over.

“Dancing one is back! This one breathes sigh of relief,” he said before tilting his head slightly when he saw the rolled up scroll. “Dancing one found something!”

She nodded and unrolled it so that she could hold it out for him to look over.

“This is a message from Empire?” he asked curiously as he hovered over her shoulder to look over it. “This one can read walking ones’ symbols. Message paper has names of food and rocks. Food and rocks were inside boxes, this one knows. But this one does not understand. Food and rocks mentioned all come from home of these ones. How do steel walking ones know to find them?”

Claire could not answer as his wings fluttered angrily and he began to question, “Is there sneaky one hiding behind this one’s wings? Snooping one selling secrets to steel walking ones? This one fears for this one’s home.”

He shook his leafy-green head before looking back to her.

“But dancing one has helped this one much today,” he told her, and she could sense the anxiety beneath as he patted her on the top of the head and finished, “Dancing one must promise to always
be friend to these ones.”

They were tough little ones, and she found it hard not to like these strange creatures. So much so that she could not help but smile and nodded as the Sylph held up his hands in celebration and cried delightedly, “Many thanks, helpful one!”

Aside from some hiccups, she felt that the Sylphs were warming up to her and she spent most of the rest of daylight around the village as the Sylphs were approaching her curiously. She laughed at some of the things these cute creatures said, enjoyed watching them dance about her head, and a few even brought her a few flowers that they decorated her hair with. All too soon, it felt as if she had known these Sylphs all her life and they seemed to enjoy her company as they talked.

“Aww, look at that,” she heard Yda say behind her as she whispered to Papalymo, “I think they like her. The Sylph Whisperer…”

“Well, of course,” he answered, “She’s not the one losing her temper with them now is she?”

“Hey! I didn’t lose my temper! I just wanted to know why they were being decidedly unhelpful with letting us speak with their Elder,” she retorted as Claire tuned them out. In all honesty, she was wondering why they were still here. The last few days felt like the two of them let her do most of the work.

Eventually, she was waved over by Komuxio, whom she noticed was looking anxious.

“Helpful one arrives at a good time! This one needs helpful one’s help!” he said, wringing his hands together, worry writ all over his face, “One of these ones named Claxio ventured outside Little Solace alone. Alone is unsafe! Helpful one must find Claxio!”

Truly? The Sylphs seemed content to remain as close as possible to Little Solace and didn’t enjoy the thought of venturing out there on their own when so many large beasts could easily hunt them.

“Okay,” Claire promised, “But do you know where he could be?”

Komuxio shook his head nervously before confessing, “Claxio struck west after leaving the settlement. Hurry before Claxio ends up in the belly of a beastly one!”

Not much else to do but head out and hope she could find him. Still, it wasn’t easy trying find a green Sylph in a forest full of leaves. She hiked for a short while, sticking close to the trees as she tried to figure out where she could begin. But that was when she spotted something green and moving out of the corner of her eye and she was startled at how easily she managed to track the Sylph down. She spotted the Sylph sulking in a tiny alcove not too far from the village and she sighed in relief as she approached.

“Excuse me?” she said, accidently startling the Sylph, who leapt an extra foot into the air in surprise, “There’s no need to be scared. Komuxio sent me to find you. Now why don’t we return to Little Solace?”

She had expected the Sylph ready to return with her. Instead, he glared furiously as he demanded, “What? Walking one wants this one to return to Little Solace? Don’t make this one laugh! This one is weary of living with those who are not these ones. This one wants to be alone. These ones rely on walking ones for everything. No better than those ones that summoned a primal one! Small wonder this one chose to leave! This one thought this a likely place to build a home. But then meddlesome one arrives— forces this one to go deeper into the forest. Meddlesome one is forbidden from following
He then flew past her without glancing back, disappearing into the foliage before she could find anything to say. She tried to follow him, but was aware that this path led her to the Bramble Patch, and she wasn’t sure if she could venture any further in, especially with how close they are supposed to be to the Sylphlands. But she feared what would happen if she left Claxio on his own, and quickly rushed back to the village to inform Komuxio what happened. The entire encounter took only a minute for her to explain, and when she finished, Komuxio let out a yelp of fear.

“What?!” he cried, his eyes wide, “B-But this one saw touched ones lurking in the forest! Helpful one must hurry— hurry and find Claxio! Before touched ones take Claxio away!”

With his blessing to go deeper into the woods, she departed once more, hurrying along the path she took before and deeper into the thorny patch. She thought it would be hard to find Claxio, but she was able to track him through the broken branches, scattered leaves, and a few droppings of spindles of threat that the Sylph clearly dropped.

She followed the trail even deeper into the Bramble Patch, feeling as if the light was being blocked out from the density of the branches overhead. After forcing her way through a particularly thick shrubbery, she spotted Claxio in a clearing up ahead and she made her way over to try and at least get him to listen to Komuxio before going any deeper.

But he heard her approach and spun about angrily at her as he snapped, “Meddling one is back!? This one told meddling one to be gone! Tell Komuxio that this one will never go back! Never!”

He then continued on, planning to go even deeper into the woods—at least until he stopped dead when a handful of Sylphs appeared out of nowhere. Claire frowned at the sight of these Sylphs, knowing that there was something not right about them. The Sylphs she had been getting to know were all of the brightest green… these though… they were colored a rather dark shade of purple instead. The color of a sickly plant…?

Claxio, however, seemed to recognize them and cried out in fear just at the sight of them.

“T-Touched ones?” Claxio yelped, moving back in a frightened way, as if terrified of these Sylphs even touching him. “Touched ones should go away too! This one is good one! Every one should just leave this one alone!”

As Claire reached behind her head to where her lance was, she heard footsteps and looked back in time to see Yda and Papalymo running towards her. As soon as they saw the situation, any sense of teasing or joking the other two had faded as their faces were deadly serious.

“Be on guard, Claire.” Papalymo warned. “These sylphs have been tempered— brought under the thrall of the primal Ramuh.”

“I assumed as much,” Claire replied. “Existing only to serve their deity, correct?”

“Yes,” Yda nodded. “They’ll not answer to words — only steel. I take no pleasure in this, but it must be done.”

With that, the three of them ran forward, causing the tempered sylphs to look up and fly at them, thunder and levin crackling at their little fingertips. Claire knew they had to be defeated, to protect Claxio, yet she still felt bad.

Eventually, with a hideous roar and a rustling, a morbol of all things, all teeth and tentacles and terrible stench, oozed out from the depths, growling and gurgling. Papalymo turned to it, fire
quickly catching at its limbs, but it was not deterred.

“Focus on the sylphs!” Yda cried, and as the last one was felled, the morbol retreated. Exhausted but relieved, the three Scions hurried to Claxio.

“Th-this one is…safe?” he whimpered cautiously, all but shaking with fright. “This one was so scared…”

“Claxio!” The three jumped, turning to see Komuxio shoot up to them. “This one has been worried! So very worried! Is Claxio unharmed? Still in possession of wits?”

Claxio blinked in surprise and confusion when he saw Komuxio flutter in, all but throwing his tiny arms around his friend’s neck.

“K-Komuxio?” Claxio gasped, looking from him to Claire before adding, “And meddling one as well… Why are these two here?”

“These two came to rescue Claxio!” Komuxio replied as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, “That Claxio is safe fills this one with joy!”

Claxio stared at him before bowing his head and tiny tears appeared in his black eyes.

“Komuxio… forgive this one,” he whimpered, “This one did not mean to run away from Little Solace. This one was just… afraid. These ones who live at Little Solace were changing — becoming friendly with other ones. This one feared that these ones were forgetting who these ones are… like touched ones did. But this one was wrong. This one can see that now.”

He sniffled a little more before drying his eyes and looked back to Claire.

“Meddling — er, helpful one,” he corrected respectfully, “This one is grateful. This one will return to Little Solace to be with Komuxio and friendly ones.”

Claire nodded kindly as Komuxio gave her a friendly wave and the pair headed back the way they came, looking all too relieved that everything ended as well as they did.

“Well, that should see to that” Papalymo said, wiping some gunk from the dead morbol off the lens of his monocle. “What say we return to Little Solace as well? I, for one, could do with a nice hot bath.”

“Yeah, you sure smell like you need one,” Yda told him and he glared up at her, threatening to use his staff as a club if she kept that up. Claire only rolled her eyes in amusement as she led the way back to the Sylph’s home.

Almost as soon as he saw her, Komuxio was waving her over from his usual spot, his smile so big that she could even see it upon his tiny mouth across the settlement.

“This one thought Claxio was lose forever. Helpful one saved Claxio — now these ones can be family again,” he cried out in joy, now spinning about in the air with an air of great joy. He even fluttered close to her face and gave her a tiny kiss on her cheek, which caused her to laugh back.

“This one has known many walking ones — even many kind walking ones — but helpful one is kindest and strongest of all. Helpful one is a hero to these ones,” he finished saying.

“That’s kind of you to say that,” she told him, feeling herself beginning to blush.
But before she could finish, little Komuxio added, “Helpful one will bring these ones and walking ones closer together — this one knows. This one would take helpful one to see elder one.”

“Truly?” Claire asked, relief spreading through her body that she would finally be able to deliver the Elder Seedseer’s message. Yet, no sooner did she ask that did Komuxio pause and the joy in his face seemed to vanish as he began to wipe at his eyes, which were suddenly full of tears.

“But elder one is… Elder one is…” he whimpered and she could feel her own sense of dread rising.

“What is it?” she asked softly as Komuxio was now fidgeting where he hovered, as if he was about to reveal the truth of something very bad.

“This one must ask kind one’s forgiveness,” he whimpered imploringly. “This one made promise to take kind one to see elder one, but this one — this one cannot…”

“Why?” Claire asked, her own worry mounting the more Komuxio fretted.

It looked as if he wanted to say something, to explain what was going on, but was terrified that she would be angry with him for lying. She just looked on, waiting, until he finally confessed, “Because — Because elder one is not here. Elder one is not anywhere. Elder one went into forest yesterday, but has not come back…”

“Why? What happened?” she asked in concern. Suddenly, Komuxio initial coldness and dismissals from the days before all made sense. What were the odds that when they came for a peace talk, their elder would disappear the day before? What terrible timing they have. Or rather… she had.

“This one is worried,” Komuxio continued on, still looking as if afraid that she was going to be offended by his ‘deception’. “Elder one often goes into forest, but never, never for this long. Kind one will help find elder one, yes?”

“She nodded, and that simple act seemed to put Komuxio’s mind at ease.

The little one sighed in relief, even fluttered closer to wrap his thin and delicate arms around her neck in a grateful hug.

“Near where elder one disappeared is the home of a walking one named Buscarron,” he explained, “Buscarron may know what happened to elder one. This one would talk to Buscarron…but walking ones do not always trust these ones. Would kind one talk to Buscarron for this one?”

She understood that Komuxio and the other Sylphs would be frightful to venture away from Little Solace right now. She nodded, promising that she would do what she could to help them.

Komuxio paused before requesting, “And…kind one comes from Gridania, yes? In Gridania live many kind ones, yes?”

She nodded, trying to remind him that there were many others who wanted to remain friends with the Sylphs; those who had no desire to fight them and would happily help them.

Perhaps she got through to him for she could see his mouth turn into a smile once more.

“This one begs of kind one,” he said humbly, “Please go to Gridania and ask fellow kind ones for help. And please hurry — these ones are not safe until elder one returns.”

Buscarron was not someone she knew or was aware of where to find him. Her best option right
now would probably to head back to the Adders Nest and inform them what’s going on. So, she teleported in midstep, vanishing on the spot and riding the flow all the way back to Gridania. Taking in a lungful of air, she choked before she hurried off, heading back towards the Adder’s Nest to speak with Commander Heuloix.

When he saw her approach, Commander Heuloix smiled as he asked, “Well, if it isn’t our intrepid ambassador. How fare your diplomatic efforts with the sylph tribes?”

Hoping that he was going to be able to hold it all together, she quickly explained what was going on, finishing up with the disappearance of the Sylph Elder. When she was done, she could see the smile wiped off his face as he grew visibly paler.

“Their elder’s gone missing, you say!?” he gasped, “Why, if he were to end up in the hands of the tempered ones, we’d have a crisis on our hands. You can assure the sylphs that my sharpest-eyed Serpents will be on the lookout night and day. No stone must be left unturned. I would ask you to call upon Giah Molkoh at Bentbranch Meadows and deliver the message that the Wood Wailers are needed in the search effort.”

Truly? Not only was she already had to speak with this Buscarron character, she was now asked to deliver another message? Biting back her retort, she nodded before hurrying out to Bentbranch in the Central Shroud, which was at least a short distance away.

After hunting around for a bit, she found this Molkoh Wood Wailer, who was on guard.

When she reached her and explained the situation, the woman’s eyes widen in surprise before nodding in understanding.

“The sylph elder has vanished? Worry not, friend — the Wood Wailers have eyes under every leaf, behind every branch,” she promised, “If the elder is anywhere in these forests, we shall find him.”

Though she was still annoyed that they seemed to be sending her off in every direction, she knew that they would do all they could in the search for the Sylph elder. It just felt that they weren’t hurrying as much as they should be given the circumstances.

She paused for a second to take a deep breath and to relax herself. Getting frustrated or annoyed wouldn’t help anyone now, she had to continue on with her own search, and that included speaking with this Buscarron person.

After asking around Bentbranch, she learned that Buscarron was in charge of a pub called the Druthers in the South Shroud; though she had to admit that she had never been as far south as the South Shroud before and headed off with slight worry in her heart as well as curiosity. She followed the trail southbound, feeling a light breeze carry her hair about her face as she reached the fork in the road—the same one that she once took on her way to the Tam-Tara Deepcroft. But instead of heading right, she took the left path and found her way through a much darker and denser part of the Shroud that she had never seen before. The dirt trail soon became more muddy and she could smell marshlands nearby as she walked down the trail that took her to a small bridge… which led to a rather run-down series of wooden buildings—the largest one full of drunken voices and the smell of ale. Figuring she found the right place, she stepped inside, glad to see that it had a much homier feel than some of the other inns that she had seen before.

After spotted a middle-aged man standing behind the counter with a patch over his eye, she figured that he was the one in charge. When she stepped up to the counter, she could see this man has a very similar air like Balderon, especially with the grin he gave her.
“Well met, adventurer!” he welcomed warmly, “We have the finest grog and grub this side of—” before he could finish, what she could tell was a series of words that he had spoken before many times before, but paused as he studied her face. “Not here to fill your belly, are you?”

She shook her head before quietly telling him about how the Sylph elder was last seen in this area but was now missing. She was trying her best to find him, but had no clues as to where to even start.

“Ahhhh…” Buscarron nodded, his cheerfulness disappearing slightly to be replaced with grave concern, “Aye, there’s been talk of a sylph lurking hereabouts, but I couldn’t rightly say if it be the elder you seek.”

“Why is that?” she asked.

“Those woodland scamps all look alike,” he countered, “Short of painting one red and another one blue, most folk would struggle to tell two of ‘em apart.”

That, she could not disagree with. In all honesty, she had to admit that he had a point.

“If you’ve the time, mayhap you could stay a while and see what the gods have in store,” he offered, “You never know, you might even stumble across this sylph elder yourself.”

She thought that over and decided that may be her best option for the time being. She did promise Komuxio that she would do her best to try and help their elder. So, she remained for the rest of the evening and late into the night, deciding to make herself useful by small tasks and odd jobs from random people all across the Druthers, even starting to get the lay of the land by exploring the South Shroud. She made sure not to stray too far from the Druthers though, knowing that she had to be on hand should Buscarron have news.

She spent the rest of the night running about, eventually allowing the darkness to turn to dawn and well into the afternoon before she allowed herself to return to the Druthers for a drink and a quick rest.

It was frustrating to be told to wait until news came in that could help, but it would seem that her deeds did not go unnoticed.

“I appreciate all the good you’ve done for our patrons today, Claire. If you aren’t disinclined, I have a favor of my own to ask you,” Buscarron asked her when she came in and he fixed up a drink of water for her. When she nodded, not even thinking about it at this point, he explained, “There’s a Qiqirn friend of mine, you see — name of Teteroon. A good lad. It was right after the Calamity that I came across him fallen in the Shroud. He nearly died in all the havoc. So I took him in and nursed him back to health best I could. He worked here at my Druthers for a spell after that. Got to talking about striking out on his own, he did, and not long after cast his lot with a merchant bound for La Noscea. Well, just so happens I got to cleaning up around here and came across something of his — this scarlet earring. I know he was fond of the thing, but he must have just forgotten it when he left. So, I’d like to see that it gets to him.”

Well it can’t be too important to him if he had forgotten it here.

Rather than say that, she concentrated on the idea of heading back to La Noscea, knowing that while it was a long way away… she was one teleport away. Still, there was no news about the Sylph elder, she supposed that she could do this while she waited for information. Maybe if she was lucky, she would have a lead by the time she got back.
She agreed, and she could see Busarron grinning as he handed over a single earring with a red stone attached to the end.

“Good,” he told her, “Can’t say for sure where he ended up, but might be a friend of mine can. A Roegadyn fellow named Baensyng. You can find him on Hawkers’ Alley in Limsa Lominsa. He knows everything of the comings and goings of merchants there.”

After sticking the earring into a pocket, she teleported from the shroud, feeling her feet leaving the ground before landing on solid ground with the smell of salt in the air. She was suddenly outside Hawkers’ Alley, listening to the loud sea shanties of nearby sailors as they walked the marketplace. Slightly dizzy from the spell, she hurried down the street, trying to avoid the loud crowd of people.

Baensyng was easy enough to find, she found him overlooking the marketplace, keeping an eye out for troublemakers or thieves. He greeted her brightly when she approached and explained what she was looking for.

“A Qiquirn what worked at the Druthers?” he asked as he thought back, “Aye, ye speak of Teteroon. Related to that Kyokyoroon bloke just o’er there by some blood or another.” He then pointed down to near the end of the alley, to where there was another Qiquirn selling off some smaller wares.

“Two of ‘em put in together an’ were makin’ good coin,” Baensyng confessed, “But ol’ Teteroon up and left Limsa not long ago. Couldn’t say as to why or where. Yer better off askin’ Kyokyoroon himself. He can be tight of lip, though, I warn ye. Best to take a chicken egg with ye.”

She arched an eyebrow at him, who shrugged back as he answered simply, “Li’l bastard loves the bloody things.”

Sounded strange, but where was the harm? She bowed her head in gratitude before she hurried off again—making sure to stop by a stall and buy a single chicken egg before she greeted the ratlike Qiqirn. She had seen a handful of them all over, but this was the first time she had really come up to one and spoke to them. It’s long, thin face sniffed at her curiously as he said, “Customer, be welcome!”

“No, I’m not a customer, I just wanted…?” she began, but Kyokyoroon interrupted her before she could finish.


Rather than waste her breath, she pulled the tiny egg out of the pouch, and she could see the Qiqirn’s eyes light up at once. “Chicken egg!” he cried joyfully, “Kyokyoroon love chicken egg! Love chicken egg more than love customer!”

He sniffed at it, his tiny clawed hands reaching for her as she pulled it out of his reach as she said, “Hold on. Please, I just wanted to ask you about Teteroon? I was told you might know him?”


“Thank you,” Claire said, handing the egg over to him as he immediately began to devour it, sticking the whole thing in his mouth and crunching down on the shell as she hurried off.

And she thought that the Sylphs spoke strangely?
Still, she got her answer, and went down towards the docks were she could take a boat to Aleport, which was just a stone’s throw away from Upper La Noscea. By the time she arrived to the small settlement and was paying the ferryman for his services, she felt the heat from the sun overhead as it bore down on her, burning the back of her neck. Shifting her lance around, realizing it was too hot to heavy around such a heavy weapon, she planned to pick up a bow when she next returned to the Twelveswood.

Thankfully, it was a straight walk from this point onwards. Taking the same trail she once used when she crossed over into her first dungeon, she passed by the caves and continued on north until she reached a much more marshlike land—a little bit like the South Shroud, only with more cliffs and less trees around her.

She continued on foot as she gazed up at the cliffs with fascination when she could see the remains of an enormous skeleton sticking halfway out of the stone. She was eager to climb up and explore it, but decided to drop off this earring first before she would go exploring.

She found the Qiqirn at a small stall set up alongside the river. Personally, she thought that this was a strange place to set up shop—for it was the middle of nowhere. Nevertheless, she approached the Qiqirn and asked him by the name of Teteroon.

“Customer, be welcome!” he squeaked happily, more friendly-sounding than Kyokyoroon sounded.

She shook her head, wondering if she should have brought an egg for him as well, and answered, “No, I’m not a customer. I merely came to bring something for you.”

Teteroon looked at her with a bright-eye curiously as he asked, almost in a child-like way, “Not customer? Not come with custom? Bring something for Teteroon?”

She merely smiled as she pulled out the small red earring from her pouch and dropped it into his large, clawed hands. As soon as he laid eyes on it, he let out a delighted squeal.

“Teteroon forget this! Forget at Druthers. Teteroon swore would never forget earring…but never forget forgot,” he cried, jumping about in joy, “Teteroon thank! Teteroon thank!” He went off with a few chirps and squeaks that made little sense to her, but she could only assume that this was how a Qiqirn expressed his happiness.

Once he paused to catch his breath, he asked her hopefully, “Good Buscaroon doing good? Good Buscaroon good to Teteroon. Teteroon miss good Buscaroon.”

She smiled back and nodded, telling him that she met him back at the Druthers and had wanted to make sure that the earring got back to its rightful owner. She immediately liked this Qiqirn and was only too happy when he insisted on making a gift to take back with her to Buscarron. After having a little bit of fun wandering about Upper La Noscea, and having her chance to climb up the bones of the dead sea-creature—which lightened up her day—she watched as Teteroon finished his bottle of Qiqirn firewater.

“Teteroon finished brewing firewater!” he said proudly as he tucked it into her bag for her, “You give to Buscaroon. Good, good Buscaroon. Good firewater for good Buscaroon.”

“I’m sure he’ll love it,” she said as he gave her instructions on the bottle. Apparently they would have to wait a year before it would be good to drink. He waved her off as she teleported back to the South Shroud, glad for her break and the worry that her new duties had been thrust upon her.
After stopping to switch out her weapon for the much lighter bow, she happily marched back into the Druthers, just as Buscarron finished serving a few drinks for some customers. When he looked up and saw her, he waved her over with a grin and said happily, “Ah, you’ve returned. Thank you for seeing Teteroon’s belongings to him.”

She only smiled back as she pulled out the bottle and told him, “A ‘thank-you’ gift from Teteroon.”

He was surprised by this, but took the bottle and sniffed at it before his eye lit up like a child who had been given the sweetest of treats.

“Qiqirn firewater! So he remembers my fondness for the drink, does he? Why that old…” he mumbled, sounding truly touched and she could see how his one eye was tearing up before he called back to where the kitchens were, “He…I… Aw, bloody hells! Who’s cutting onions back there!”

She giggled at that before she told him, “Teteroon misses you greatly. And he said to keep the firewater shelved for at least a year so that it can ferment properly.”

He half laughed and half groaned at that before nodding in understanding.

“He says to shelve it for a year, does he? Aye, that sounds about right,” he said, “I hate to have to wait, but I reckon it’ll be worth it. This stuff has an aroma and body unlike any other drink I know.” He stared sadly at the bottle before tucking it down below the counter as he sighed, “It’s going to be a loooong year.”

He then clapped his hands and offered, “What say you come back then, friend? We’ll see if we can’t make it through this bottle together.”

She beamed back and answered, “I’ll hold you to that. Sounds like a date.” But her smile soon faded as she pressed him for information on the missing Sylph elder, and she was glad to see that he nodded.

“Yes, there was word while you were away,” he confessed, “Sylphs were seen in the wood, but near no lands of their own. No, this was a place near to here — a place we’ve never known a sylph to come. Something must have given them cause to venture this far. More than like, the missing sylph elder’s among them.”

He then asked her for her map so that he could mark a few locations she could investigate and see if she could find anything. She hurried off, making for the first location, which was just a little to the northeast.

However, what she found weren’t any Sylphs. Instead, she was attacked by Imperial soldiers of all people. Even though they fell to her bow quickly enough, she didn’t like the thought of innocent people trying to just walk the path only to be attacked by Imperials. And it was the same at the other locations that she went to examine close-up.

When she returned to Buscarron and explained what happened, she could see how his jaw dropped open in horror. At first, it was as if he didn’t believe her, at least until she showed him the few pieces of the metal armor she took from the soldiers who attacked her, and laid them on the counter so that he could see that she wasn’t lying.

“Garleans!?” he gasped, “In this part of the Twelveswood!?”

She could only shrug, unable to answer. In truth, she knew no more than he did, nor did she have anything to say to bring him comfort in this worrying case. She only watched as he ran a concerned
“Hmmm… First sylphs and now Garleans, and all in the same place,” he muttered, “It cannot be mere coincidence. Might the Garleans be following the sylphs? Tracking them or giving chase, mayhap?” But no sooner did he say that did he shake his head at the suggestion and continued on, as if he almost forgot that she was even there, “But no, not this far into the forest. The Waiters’ spires are everywhere. Imperials could never have stolen past them all. How in the bloody hells could they— Unless…”

He didn’t even need to finish, for she could see where his thoughts were taking him with this. Unless someone was a traitor. And that was when she remembered the supplies of food and ores that she discovered and how upset her Sylph friend was at the thought that there was a traitor in their midst.

She informed Buscarron of this, she could see his worry turn solemn as he began putting the pieces together.

“I’m thinking I might know our suspect,” he suggested, after another moment of silence, “There’s a regular of mine who used to dine on thin soup, and sip his pint on account of not being able to afford another. But of late, he’s taken to ordering my best wines and the finest cuts of meat I can lay my hands on. Were he a merchant, I’d prob’y think nothing of it, but this lad’s a Wood Wailer… And Wood Wailers don’t earn that kind of coin. By chance, I was musing on where the money was coming from when you first told me about the Garleans in the forest, and I couldn’t help putting two and two together.”

Well, if that was the case, it sure wasn’t smart of that Wailer to be flaunting his coin like that. Of course people would be getting suspicious; and Buscarron seemed as sharp as a nail to her.

“Suffice it to say, if a Wailer’s working for the Empire, none of us is safe,” he finished speaking.

“I can go and speak to him for you,” she offered, “Who is he?”

“The lad’s name is Laurentius. Last I heard, he was in the South Shroud,” he answered, “Find him, Claire, and if he is up to no good, put an end to it — and him, if it comes to that.”

That was a grim way to put it.

She nodded again in understanding before turning her steps to the door. So, there was a Wood Wailer who may be working for the Empire? She didn’t want to jump to conclusions, but if there was even the slightest chance that he could be selling secrets, she would have to at least question him. If he proved to be honest, then she could put Buscarron’s worries to rest if nothing else. Who knows, perhaps he may have seen the missing Sylph elder?

Still, she had a strong sense of foreboding… a sensation she was quickly growing to recognize whenever something bad was about to happen.

After wandering about the grove of the wooded parts of the Shroud, she found the Hyur Wood Wailer standing guard. At first, he seemed merely irritated with her presence as she kept following him. But it wasn’t long before she realized that he was all but running from her and that brought a frown to her face.

What was he hiding that he was afraid she would see?

Eventually, when she finally caught up to him, he showed his true colors by summoning up a group of Imperials. Her frustration was replaced with surprise to suddenly be surrounded by
Imperials, but she was more than capable of dealing with these slow, lumbering soldiers before she continued her chase.

She was all but seething when she finally caught up to him near a cliff, and he looked ready to start climbing it if it meant getting away from her. But when he saw her racing towards him, he spun around, before he began cursing in desperation.

“How long do you mean to keep this up?” Laurentius all but bellowed at her, trying to play off the ‘innocent bystander’ act, “What is it you imagine I’ve done? Enough! Enough, I say!”

“Do you really think I’m that dense?” she retorted. “I think it’s pretty obvious you’re working with the Empire.”

He blinked at that, as if he somehow believed that she didn’t know that. But his shoulders slumped as he shook his head.

“It’s…it’s over, then,” he confessed, no longer seeing the point in trying to hide it. “Aye, I sold maps and rations to the Empire. It was I. I mean no harm. I only wanted the coin.”

“You sold out your honor for a few pieces of coin?” she asked in disgust. “What of those who look to you for protection? Would they think the same way?”

Laurentius winced, as if her words were knives in his body.

“The Wailers are good. Strong. I was…proud to join their ranks. Am proud,” he countered as she glared back. “But… They do not provide. They preach justice, honor, duty. But in the end, it is those with money who do as they will. Who live as they will. …So I sought an opportunity to change my fortunes, and took it.”

She sighed, shaking her head as she continued looking at him. Oh, she knew the desire to be able to provide for herself. To be able to stand on her own feet and make her fortune in the world. But willing to sell others for the sake of it? That… she could not condone.

“You’re right. All I’ve done, I’ve done for money. Endangered myself, my home, everything and everyone I love… Why, my actions have put your life in danger, too…” he declared before his words trailed off in a way as if he didn’t truly believe them. Just then, he let out a harsh bit of laughter as he demanded, “Though you do not yet realize how much! Bloody idiot — did you imagine that you had cornered me? It is not I who is cornered.”

Her eyes narrowed as she realized that they weren’t alone. She had been so focused on Laurentius, she didn’t realize the bodies moving about her through the trees. Before she knew it, she was surrounded on all sides as Garleans stepped out, read to fight. She gritted her teeth, doubling her grip on the bow as she realized how much trouble she was in at this moment. There were too many Garleans to count, but she knew she was outnumbered.

“Permit me a question, if you will,” Laurentius questioned her suddenly, “Are all adventurers so deluded as to believe they can challenge the power of Garlemald?”

“How about we find out?” she challenged, determined to take as many of these guys with her if she was going to die here.

“So that’s the way of it,” came a voice behind Claire, “Swapped your hard bunk at the Barracks for a feather bed in Garlemald, did you?”

She looked in time to see a group of people coming towards her, the largest, and the one who
spoke, spat out onto the ground as he fingered a lance. Wait, she recognized them as some poachers she spotted within the wood. And it looked at least a dozen of them here.

The man stopped next to her and gave a rather mischievous grin as he asked, “You there, Hyur. You stand here at ol’ Busc’s wish, no?”

She nodded as he grinned even wider as more poachers and bandits joined them.

“Then you don’t stand alone,” he reassured her.

She didn’t know how it happened or why. All she knew was that she was joined with bandits and poachers on all sides. The Elzeen Redbellies and the Miqo’te Coeurclaw. While the Imperials were strong enough to hold their own, they were having a hard time fighting with such heavy armor as they stood against those who lived in these woods all their lives. In no time at all, they unlikely alliance worked and it was just her and Laurentius left.

When the others finished dealing with all the Imperials and there was just one cowardly Wood Wailer left, they turned and disappeared back into the darkness of the trees, believing she could handle the rest on her own. And she was aware of this as she gave Laurentius a hard kick and he stared up at her.

“Impossible…” Larentius gasped, staring at her with wide eyes. “H-How did you beat the Empire’s finest? And with bandits and poachers at your side!? They are your sworn enemies! Why do they fight with you and not against you?”

But no sooner did he ask that did he slump forward, as if the answer hit him over the head like a blacksmith’s hammer.

“…Ah, but I know the answer only too well. Buscarron. This is his doing,” he muttered, “His words are wont to inspire men to act. Better men than I…”

Claire didn’t remove her arrow from the bow, but she let it go slack as she watched him, waiting to see what he would decide next.

“Gods, what have I become? What have I done?” he asked himself.

“What is it you wish to do?” Claire asked him emotionlessly.

He sighed, guilt upon his features as he stood.

“I…I am sorry. No more will I pursue this folly,” he said, “No more bribes. I will go to the Order of the Twin Adder and confess my crimes.”

Perhaps it was because he sounded so genially remorseful she found herself believing him. Though she also was aware that he would use this chance to run away. So long as he was out of the woods, that was fine with her.

“Good luck,” she replied, and perhaps it was just her imagination, she could see the gratitude in his eyes as he nodded back.

“There is also something I would like you to tell Buscarron. Tell him Laurentius the fool says ‘thank you’. I feel as though a veil has been lifted from before my eyes,” he said before falling silent for another moment. “And thank you, as well, adventurer.”

She watched him leave… a little surprised to see that he was heading to the path that would take
him to the Central Shroud… to Gridania. She watched him leave, not saying anything before she sighed and left, making her way back to the Druthers.

She took her time, taking far longer than she would have normally to return. Perhaps she wanted to give Laurentius time to prove he was as good as his word. She wasn’t sure what it was, she just felt this stab of pity for the man, though she wasn’t sure why.

It was mid-afternoon by the time she arrived and Buscarron was waiting; waving when he saw her step into the small pub.

“Aye, I already know,” he sighed just as she was starting to explain. “Laurentius confessed to his crimes. Just had word from the Twin Adder. Seems he marched straight into the Nest and gave himself up.”

Well, at least he didn’t run away like she expected him to. Perhaps some time locked up will allow him to think over his life choices and where to go from here.

Buscarron shook his head sadly as he added, “The lad’s had quite a life, you know… His mother was killed by a brigand when he was only small. As a young man, he joined the Wailers, hoping to spare his fellow Gridanians the misery he’d known growing up. Trouble is, protecting Gridania’s too big a job for one man, and he came to believe that he couldn’t make a difference — that it was hopeless. There are few things more dangerous than desperation, and a man lost in the dark is easily drawn to the glimmer of coin. I reckon he thought that if he couldn’t change the lot of his fellow man, he might as well change his own. Thing is, he was making a difference — just not on his own. Somehow, he’d failed to grasp one simple truth — that those things we cannot do alone, we must do together.”

Sad that he couldn’t see the good he was doing… as well as the harm.

She nodded before passing on Laurentius’s message to him.

“Did he now?” Buscarron smiled, looking somewhat comforted by that. “Then there’s good in him yet. I just hope them at the Adder’s Next are able to see it… What he’s done ain’t easy to forgive, but I’d like to think he’d be afforded a chance to make amends. But let us leave fates to the Twelve. I have other news for you, Claire.”

Her head jerked up and she waited with baited breath as he grinned and told her, “The sylph elder has been found!”

Oh, thank the Twelve! She was starting to think that they were never going to get anywhere at this rate. And then, as if on cue, Yda and Papalymo seemed to magically appear as Buscarron went on, “It’s taken us a fair old while, but we’ve finally got our hands on some reliable information concerning the whereabouts of your missing green friend.”

“His name is Frixio, and he is the eldest amongst the sylphs of Little Solace,” Papalymo corrected rather stiffly, “Long has he represented his kind in dialogue with the Gridanians.”

“Yes, he’s like a bridge between us and them—a small, leafy, green bridge that we can’t find at the moment,” Yda added. “And bridges are no use if you don’t know where they are. That’s why it’s so important that we find him!”

Right, so what were the two of them doing all this time?

Buscarron then nodded in understanding as he crossed his arms and thought it all over.
“There’s an abandoned dungeon called the Thousand Maws of Toto-Rak here in the South Shroud,” he informed them, “‘Twas by the entrance to the place that Frixio was seen — and not long ago, neither. If you hurry, I reckon you’ll find him”

Before they could continue on with explaining where the dungeon entrance was, she heard a young voice crying out, surprisingly loud despite the owner being so small, “Walking ones, please help this one! This one needs help! Needs help to help elder one! Poor Frixio! Poor, poor Frixioooo!!”

She knew right away that it was a Sylph, and she turned to see another Sylph fluttering into the entrance of the Druthers—it’s leaves ruffled and torn, and wearing a red leaf as a mask. She, whom she could only assume it was a female from the voice, was panicking, and all but flying about wildly as she looked for someone to listen.

The four of them looked to the Sylph who was begging for aid.

“Elder one went into Toto-Rak, but has not returned!” she tried to explain, “This one is worried, so very worried!”

Toto-Rak? Of all the places that he could have gone into?? It seemed that she was right, for Buscarron was frowning heavily and stated, “And you’re right to be… The place fair crawls with nasties waiting to make a meal of anyone daft enough to wander in.”

Did he have to say that when the little Sylph was all but in tears?

“What in the seven hells was he thinking, entering that bloody deathtrap?” Buscarron questioned.

“Elder one had no choice!” the Sylph cried out, “Imperial ones were chasing elder one! Please! Walking ones must help elder one— help elder one now!”

Papalymo groaned, frustrated at this before saying, “The fates conspire against us! Forgive my pragmatism, but Frixio is our best hope of reaching an accord with the sylphs. Were we to lose him, all our efforts thus far will have been for naught.”

He then looked at them all, already ordering them how best to go about this, “Come, I will tend to our friend’s wounds.” He then looked to Yda and added, “Yda, make haste to the Adder’s Nest and request assistance.”

“Understood!” Yda saluted before she turned and began to run, most likely ready to sprint all the way back to Gridania before Papalymo turned to her, with an apologetic look on his face.

“Claire — go to the Thousand Maws of Toto-Rak and see that Frixio comes to no harm,” he told her, “Peace between man and sylph rests upon your success.”

How did she know that he would ask her that?

Still, there wasn’t much time. If Toto-Rak was as dangerous as Buscarron made out to be, there wasn’t a moment to lose to save Frixio.

She nodded, still feeling a bit frustrated that she was expected to go in there on her own. Seriously, would it have been too much effort to contact Minfilia and inform her what was going on, so that she could inform the Adder’s Nest, leaving the Sylph here in the care of Buscarron, whom she was certain could help, and help her with this dungeon?

Rather than say this, she hurried out of the room and towards the entrance to the dungeon and hope that she wasn’t too late.
Into the Beast’s Maw

Chapter Summary

So now the journey must take her into the depths of the Thousand Maws of Toto-Rak to save the elder of the Sylphs. But on the way down there, she encounters a man dressed in black and a crimson mask... who seems uneasy with her presence. She doesn't have time to worry though, for the future of man and Sylph-kind is depending on her success! As well as a unique gift waiting for her afterwards.

Finding the entrance to Toto-Rak wasn’t hard… it was trying to get in. A distance away from the Druthers in one of the deeper parts of the woods, she found a Wood Wailer in front of an ancient-looking door from some old ruins and knew this had to be the right place. At first, the guard would not let her near, even as she pleaded. Though she did not want to worry anyone, she finally confessed that elder of the Sylphs was lost inside and she had been asked to find him.

Upon hearing that, his eyes widened as he gasped, “What? The Sylph elder is inside? And you are sure of this?”

“Why would I make it up?” she demanded hotly, knowing that time was of the essence. The man thought it over for only a moment, realizing that she had no reason to lie to him and he muttered, “How in the seven hells did he manage to sneak by? Gods strike me down for a purblind fool! You must find the Sylph elder before he falls prey to the fiends within. Entrance to Toto-Rak is ordinarily restricted, but these are exceptional circumstances. Pray enter as soon as you are ready.”

“More than,” she reassured him as he quickly took the lock off the door and proceeded to open it. The heavy stone door had not moved in years though, and it was a struggle for him to be able to get it wrenched open far enough so that she could slip inside.

“Good luck,” he told her as she passed and entered the dark gloom of the dungeon.

This place was not unlike the Deepcroft and she could not help but wonder that whoever built that place had done so with this one? It was lit by flickering enchanted torches that created pools of light spaced far apart upon the cracked stone paths. As she pressed on, she felt the moss upon the walls as the smell of mold reached her nose, knowing that this place had been left to nature for some time now. She could see the spores and fungi growing uncontrollably all over the cobbled floors and stone walls, showing the dungeon’s age – while some strange phosphorescent growths giving the spaces unlit by torches an eerie glow—reminding her of fireflies.

Like she expected, the dungeon was full of beasts. But rather than with things like pirates, undead, and giants… these were much wilder. There were skinny puk, large landtraps almost as pretty as they were dangerous, chigoes scuttling about, and banemites… no shortage of many-legged banemites.

As she ventured forth, she found an old message scrolled upon a plaque on the wall and she paused, just able to make out the words even after years of mold and decay. According to this, the strange glowing firefly objects she had seen in the corridors were known as magitek photocells. Apparently these were some sort of power source for certain pieces of machinery left behind in the dungeon. She ran her hand over the notes, realizing that the notes weren’t as old as the rest of the
dungeon and were part of some expedition through Toto-Rak several years ago.

Not sure what else she would find, she decided to gather up some of these photocells, just to be on the safe side. Whenever she passed one, she would tuck it safely into a pouch on her side, though she wasn’t sure how she would be able to use them even if she did find these machines?

However, she found out pretty quickly that taking these glowing photocells turned out to be a smart move. For as she explored the deeper tunnels, she found a small machine, hardly bigger than her forearm, settled in the middle of a wider room. But not only that, there seemed to be a glowing wall of mist blocking her way further downwards.

Smiling, she approached the terminal, removing some of the photocells from the pouch and experimenting with the machine. After several minutes, she managed to figure out that she could fit four of them into the back. Once she did and was ready to see if she could turn it on… that was when the noise she was making managed to draw out a large Ochu.

“Really?” she sighed as she spun around and began to battle with it, forced to cough up the poison it was spitting out. Though it wasn’t difficult to kill it, she felt that she was going to be needing a long, hot bath after this run. After leaving it to decay, she turned her attention back to the terminal, fiddling with it for a while before she was able to figure out how to work the slots so that it began to light up. As soon as it did, the barrier that prevented her from going further, faded and she was on her way once more.

Deeper in, she could smell water and more mold, feeling the damp decay in the air as the humidity was making her sweat. She found more of the phosphorescent plants lighting the way this time, rather than the enchanted torches, and she hurried passed them, deeper into the dungeon.

Here, funguar and flans were waiting for her, leaving slimy ooze and bad smells that made her feel queasy. Yet still, she ventured even deeper into this dark place, wondering just how deep this thing went? But the further she got, the thicker the webbing seemed to become so that it was coating the walls and floors as well as giant sacs full of eggs were nestled in clumps ever so often. She fought the disgust, making sure to destroy the vilekin eggs as she passed… glad she had a bow and arrow with her for the first time she fired an arrow into the eggs, they exploded in a cloud of poison.

She was safer at killing them from a distance.

She passed another strange terminal on her way deeper, slaying a couple more ochu’s who sprang up from when she got close. After using the other four photocells she collected earlier, to shut down the machine, she saw the barrier die and allow her to go onwards. She had to hurry… the Sylph elder had been down here for hours now, and she wasn’t sure how long he could survive here.

That was when she nearly ended up slipping upon a trail of disgusting green slime that was coating the floors and she had to grab hold of a wall to prevent herself from falling. She wrinkled her nose as she slipped and slide down the slope, noticing that not only how stick and foul-smelling it was, her feet kept getting caught and she was weighing down. Her movements through the slime were sluggish at best and she did not want to think of what left this stuff here.

She had to be getting somewhere, surely the elder wouldn’t have flown in too deep for fear of never finding his way out?

Eventually though, once she killed another handful of mites and fought her way through another wall of webbing, she came out onto a ledge that overlooked a large room that had more slime dripping from the ceiling and pooling around the corners of the room. She jumped down from the
small ledge, careful not to get tangled up in the webs in the process and proceeded forward… at least until…?

She stopped dead when she realized that there was someone in the room with her. Standing there with his back to her was a man in a long, black robe adorn with silver decorations and purple patterns mixed into the cloth.

“Darkness…” the warm voice warned and she staggered again, feeling concern and fear in mother Hydaelyn’s voice that time. She focused herself on her situation as the man slowly turned to face her, and she blinked, startled to see the crimson mask covering half of his face so that she could only see his mouth.

As soon as he saw her, however, she watched as his mouth twisted into a mocking smile as he spoke… but though the words meant little to her ears, the meaning was perfectly clear in her mind.

“The mighty slayer of Ifrit now comes to me,” she heard him say with a chuckle. “…With a countenance that bespeaks understanding. An intriguing power, the Echo. I must needs choose my words with care.”

He paused, when he saw her glare at him and this seemed to amuse him as he spoke, this time in common tongue, “Mayhap I might if I deign to speak in my guest’s crude tongue. We meet at last.”

He bowed low to her, though it was also clearly in a mocking way, as he introduced himself, “I am Lahabrea, of the Ascians, servant to the one true god.”

True god? What did he mean by that? And Lahabrea? She had never heard of such a name before, nor had she ever heard of the Ascians.

The man then went on speaking, never minding her confusion, as he continued to observe her, as if she were a painting that had captured his attention as he tried to figure it out.

“Yours is a most fantastical tale,” he informed her, “Truly absorbing. It is a tale to tell Eorzea’s children before bedtime. And it will soon be dark, Bringer of Light.”

“The Dark Minions…” Mother’s words were in her ears again, and she gulped, knowing that whoever this guy was, was enough to cause Hydaelyn great worry.

Lahabrea laughed once more, his grin only continuing to widen as he finished, “All that stands between this world and darkness is an irksome anomaly in the aether – the Echo. Yes…yours is a most fascinating tale.” Alas, like all good tales, it must needs come to an end. But fear not…”

She really didn’t like the way he was smiling at her. Nor did she need her mother whispering in her ear to know what he was.

“Hear… Feel… the presence of evil…” the words of Mother Hydaelyn warned once more as she watched Lahabrea raise up a hand and pointing above them and he could see a rather sickly shade of purple light break forth. Getting the attention of something enormous skittering across the ceiling. She looked up in time to see the light engulf the creature as it shrieked…

He raised a hand, pointing it behind him as it began to shimmer and glow with sickly purple light – and a banemite skittering across the ceiling shrieked as the light began to engulf it.

“…For the end of your tale is but the beginning of another… The tale of the Crystal’s demise!” Lahabrea laughed and the entire room was filled with the dark light. She only managed to get a glimpse of his twisted smirk before he vanished and the larger than normal size banemite crashed
down, landing in front of her and cracking the stone beneath their feet.

She gritted her teeth as she reached for her bow, knowing that she had to worry about this thing now.

She ducked as the pincers snapped at her, feeling how the sickly green poison spilled out of its stinger on its tail and pooled on the ground. She had to jump back to avoid it, feeling sick just being around the fumes. But as she moved back, she could see its tail swinging towards her and she moved too slow as it collided with her and knocked her to the floor. She could feel the poison splash on her legs in the process and she bit back her scream. She swung upwards, tearing the parts of her armor off her the lower part of her body to get the poison off before it touched her skin.

It swung its tale around, so much so that the skin crumbled off the end where more poison was now spilling out. If she didn’t do something fast, then she would be up to her ankles in a river of death.

So she pulled her bow off and began to fire arrows from a distance, finding their mark, and soon was filled with so many arrows that the end of the tail exploded and the creature was shrieking in pain. She grinned as it turned back to face her, now full of fury in its many eyes as it charged at her.

“Gotcha,” she said and she took careful aim as she fired one more arrow, this one going straight down its mouth and into its throat before it also exploded inside it, and she jumped back as it shrieked once more, thrashing about in pain… and then crashed to the floor… disappearing in a burst of black aether until even the poison around them faded, and leaving her alone.

For those first few minutes, she thought that she braved this terrible place, only to have to return and sadly tell the Sylphs that their elder was eaten. But that was when she heard something struggling from above. She leapt back, fear in hear heart at the thought of another banemite jumping out… but what fell was a thick sac from the webs on the ceiling and fell with a surprisingly soft thumping sound. She sighed in relief… at least, until she saw that there was something wiggling about inside. She reached for her bow once more before something came bursting out from the cocoon and she almost laughed with relief.

It was certainly not another banemite… but a Sylph—and a much older one at that. While most of the others she had seen were all the colors of bright green that reminded her of fresh leaves in spring, this one’s leaves were older and ruffled with the green having left him so that it resembled dried leaves.

There was no doubt in her mind that this was the Sylph elder she had been searching for. Alive and very much in one piece. He was now gasping for air and was shaking himself off as he coughed out.

“Finally, fresh air!” the Sylph said in relief before sniffing about and almost gagging as he adds, “Mayhap not so fresh…but better than before.”

She watched as he looked around, his back still to her, as he said to himself, “Ah, sinister one is gone! This one can leave this awful place!”

He turned around, finally spotting Claire there and looked surprised as he asked, “Hm? Did walking one vanquish the many-legged one?”

“Then this one is grateful to walking one!” the elder smiled warmly at her and she smiled back, glad to see that he was safe. But before they could go any further, that familiar pain struck her head, as well as the ringing in her ears that almost knocked her out. She closed her eyes, trying hard not to pass out as a new image appeared before her.

*Flashback*

She was watching men dressed in cold armor walking through the empty paths of Little Solace. As soon as they heard the sounds of their metal frames coming closer to their homes, she gave the order for her people to hide. After the disappearance of many of their fellows, she didn’t want to take any chances of anyone else getting lost or separated from them. She watched with Noraxia at her side, fluttering upon the wind with her wings as she watched the soldiers all looking through the village.

Most of them were soldiers dressed in black armor, but there was one who wore armor the color of blood and was walking around their home as if looking for something important. She watched from behind a tree as the other walking steel ones all saluted to the one in crimson as one of them said sharply, “Alpha squad reporting, sir! Nothing of note at Larkscall, sir!”

The man in the crimson armor nodded, and when he spoke, he sounded deeply annoyed as he told them, “Understood. Return to area twelve.” He then shook his head as he demanded, “Damn it all…where is that accursed eikon hiding?”

Where these walking steel ones looking for Lord Ramuh? But these ones did not summon him! Why would he possibly be thinking that they had?

That was when the crimson armored walking one questioned, “No sign of our wizened friend?”

“I’m afraid not, my lord,” one of them explained. “Shall I order that the search perimeter be expanded?”

“Absolutely not,” the crimson walking one countered, “We risk alerting the Gridanians to our presence. His Excellency bid us avoid unnecessary confrontation. Loath though I am to admit it, I have found no evidence to suggest that Ramuh will be gracing the mortal realm in the near future.”

He sighed in frustration, “I ask you... what good is a god who does not grant one’s wishes? Were I a Sylph, I should strongly consider finding myself another idol.”

No, because she understood the risks involved. Even if Lord Ramuh wished otherwise, his mere presence would drain the land dry and walking ones would go to war over what was left of it. They couldn’t allow that to happen.

The crimson armored walking one then paused thoughtfully, “Which reminds me — what of the Sylphs we captured? A handful of them seemed to be in reasonably good health when last I looked.”

The armored man shook his head, his voice apologetic as he stuttered out, “Ah. A-Apologies, my lord. I fear we may have been...overzealous in our efforts to compel them to summon their eikon.”

Wait... what did he mean by that? He didn’t... they didn’t...?

Her worst fears were confirmed when the crimson-coated walking one shook his head.

“...Really, Centurion — were you not aware that vegetables bruise easily? It is well that I did not entrust you with the important task of making my dinner,” he said before shrugging. “Well,
mayhap it was a kindness. Better dead in truth than dead to one’s own god, I suppose...if you believe in such things.”

She felt her hands clench tightly, rage rising in her heart as the soldiers all began to ready for departure.

“Useless... We are so close to completion, I can fair taste it, but at this rate...” the crimson armored one said with a shake of his head. “No, I must be patient. Our efforts will bear fruit in due time.”

He looked again up at the sky.

“...What was it you always said? Ah, yes: ‘Though it mean bringing down the very heavens, who shall challenge the limits of possibility if not we?’ In that alone you were right...Garlond,” she heard the crimson helmed walking one say to himself. “But your star is long fallen, while mine doth begin to rise. And it shall burn so bright — so bright that Lord van Baelsar’s ultimate weapon will seem a mere candle beside it!”

She only frowned even further when she heard him burst out laughing, with a sharpness that reminded her of the spears that the walking wood ones sometimes carried with them.

“Those walking ones did for Noxia! This one is certain of it!” Noraxia said to her in anger and fear.

“This one fears that other taken ones also suffered the same fate...” she agreed, grief and pain in her heart of the thought of so many of their people suffering in such a way.

“This one is convinced!” Noraxia wailed mournfully. “Walking ones have black hearts, seek only to harm these ones! Walking ones are not to be trusted!”

But she shook her head, not wanting to believe that even though the thought of revenge was also in her heart at the thought of how coldly they spoke of her people. She focused on reminding herself of people such as the Elder Seedseer and many others from Gridania who saw them as friends.

“But she shook her head, not wanting to believe that even though the thought of revenge was also in her heart at the thought of how coldly they spoke of her people. She focused on reminding herself of people such as the Elder Seedseer and many others from Gridania who saw them as friends.

“Now, now, Noraxia...do not pass judgment too hastily. Not all walking ones are alike. Though there are evil ones among the walking ones, there are good ones also.”

If only they could remember that hope, for they needed it now more than ever before.

*End of Flashback*

Claire blinked as the pain faded from her mind and the dungeon slowly returned around her. She gave her head a little shake to dispel the hazy mist from her mind as she remembered where she was.

But it seemed that her episode did not go by unnoticed, for the Sylph elder was gazing down at her through his twinkling black eyes, now turned with concern.

“Does walking one feel unwell?” he asked her worriedly.

She shook her head a she forced a smile, reassuring him that she was just fine.

It seemed to be enough to ease the elder’s mind before he asked, as if just realizing where they were, “This one would know, what brings walking one to this place?”
She then told him about how Noraxia all but ran them over when she came screaming to them for help. At the news that Noraxia was safe, the elder gasped in relief as he said, “Came to this one’s rescue at Noraxia’s bidding? Then this one owes walking one a debt of gratitude!”

“You are very welcomed,” she told him, “I’m glad to have done it. I have a few questions for you regarding your god however and I…?”

“Walking one has questions about Lord Ramuh?” the elder interrupted, “Then this one will provide answers. But first, yes, let these ones quit this lightless place. This one will return to Little Solace. When walking one is ready, please come and see this one. These ones may speak properly then.”

She was all for that plan, having enough of this dark and foul place. Of course, getting out turned out to be no easy task, especially in trying to climb up the thick slope of slime, which slowed her down considerably. The elder had no problem, of course, being able to fly, but she felt that there were weights tying her down and she huffed in determination to get herself back up no matter how many times she kept sliding down.

Thankfully, once she passed all the slime, it was a much smoother path… though it was still easy to get lost in this place. The elder seemed content to stick close besides her as they continued out together until the smell of decay and spores were left behind them and fresh air could be smelled just up ahead.

She breathed the fresh air in deeply, feeling better almost the instant she climbed out of that place, and stretched out her arms as the elder did the same, enjoying the warm sun on his withered face. The guard, who seemed to have been waiting anxiously for them, stared with his mouth wide open when he saw the two emerge alive and in one piece. She and Frixio waved as they stepped away before he could say anything, and she couldn’t help but chuckle at the thought.

Frixio turned back to her and thanked her once again for rescuing him, promising that they would speak soon. He must hurry back to Little Solace as soon as possible so to reassure his people that he was alive and well, but he would be waiting eagerly for her arrival.

Claire agreed as she headed back to the Druthers to find Buscarron and the others, as well as get this gunk off her. She managed to clean herself up by the small river that flowed right through to the Druthers so that she felt relatively back to normal by the time she stepped in through the front doors.

Buscarron, whose face was looking a little paler than the last time she saw it, looked up and melted into relief when she stepped forward.

“Ah, Claire, you’re back!” he waved joyfully, “Tell me the Sylph elder is well!”

She nodded, promising that he would be heading back to Little Solace now and was safe and sound. At that, he sighed, as if a great weight was taken off his mind.

“Thank the Gods for that!” Buscarron exclaimed, wiping nervous beads of sweat from his brow, “I’m full glad Frixio didn’t come to any harm.” He chuckled. “Ah, but there I go tempting fate. Run over to Little Solace and secure us peace with the Sylphs before aught else befalls us, eh? Rest assured, I’ll send word to our friends of Sharlayan and the Twin Adder both.”

That was a great relief to hear. She was already planning to head back to Little Solace now and she would have hated to have taken an extra side trip when so much needed to be done.

Buscarron then reached over the counter and clapped his hand on her shoulder as he looked at her...
with a fierce amount of pride.

“You’ve done Gridania a great service this day, lass — and earned yourself a place of honor here at the Druthers in so doing,” he said before grinning and added, “Be sure and come by whenever you feel like a drop of Qiqirn firewater!”

Claire could not help but laugh at that, grinning widely at the thought of what Qiqirn firewater would taste like. With how excited that Buscarron was though, she figured that it must be good stuff.

—Before I forget. There’s something I’d like to ask you to see delivered to the Sylphs, as well — this Azeyma rose oil,” Buscarron added, almost afraid that he had forgotten, as he reached down below the counter and pulled out a small glass bottle. Not unlike the kind she saw for sale in the Ul’dah’s markets that sold expensive perfumes and oils.

“It’s a gift to celebrate the safe return of their tribe’s elder — and a token of Gridania’s desire to unite,” he explained as she picked it up and took a quick sniff. She closed her eyes as the wonderful scent of the roses filled her nose and brought her back to memories of a different life… both happy and sad ones.

Including the image of a little girl with pink hair practicing with a wooden sword in a field of flowers…?

She wasn’t sure why the smell was enough to nearly choke her with emotions, but she managed to beat those down before Buscarron could worry.

But he was already lost in his own memories.

“The wood is not what it once was,” he sighed, “The Calamity changed the elementals — weakened them. Until their strength is returned, we must lend them ours to keep the wood safe. But ours alone will not be enough. We must have the strength of the Sylphs, as well. Only working together and fighting together will we survive together — and the Twelveswood with us. The gift I ask you to bear is a symbol of hope that both Gridanian and Sylph alike will live to see the light beyond this darkness.”

He was a romantic… she could tell that just by those words alone. She smiled as she carefully tucked the vial away in a pocket as she promised, “I’ll make sure that they know it.”

She gave him one last smile before she turned on her heel and left through the door. Thanks to her spending the last few days in this part of the shroud, she came to learn that there was a much easier shortcut to the East Shroud from here so she didn’t have to worry about going all the way up through the Central Shroud.

She went further west before reaching a path that would take her through some older ruins and a clear way straight back to Little Solace. Along the way there, she reached up to her ear and paused for a moment before reaching Papalymo, whom she found slightly easier to get along with than with Yda.

“Claire?” he questioned, “Oh, thank the Twelve that you’re safe! We were just returning Noraixa back to her people and were making our way back to the South Shroud to see if we could join you!”

Somehow she doubted that.

“Are you talking to Claire?” she heard Yda question, “Is she alright? I know she is! I mean, after fighting against Ifrit, how tough could a small dungeon have for her? Tell her I said hi! Wait, why
Claire fought a chuckle as she rolled her eyes, hearing Papalymo shush Yda before questioning, “Yes, yes, Yda. She’s perfectly fine, at least I hope she is. You are, aren’t you?” he added and she knew he was turning the conversation back to her.

“I’m fine,” she promised, “I’m heading back to Little Solace, the elder should be there by now as well. We can talk more later.”

“Wai—” Papalymo said as she hung up, sighing in relief from the touch of silence that reached her ears. The walk the rest of the way was like a stroll through the woods.

*Later*

She knew that everything was good almost as soon as she stepped into the village. There were wide smiles on each of the Sylphs faces, many of them were dancing and spinning in the air as if they had not a care in the world. Some of them even let out cries of excitement when they saw her pass; most likely already having heard of her part in the safe return of their elder.

So it was with a self-satisfied sense of pleasure as she walked further in, pausing only to deliver the rose oil to one of the many Sylphs, who was busy tending to a small fire. The little one was delighted with the gift and thanked her greatly, dancing about as she fluttered her wings.

Claire then headed on until she reached Komuxio, who seemed to have been waiting for her, judging from the eager expression on his face.

“This one has been expecting walking one!” he said happily as he spun about. “This one fetches elder one!”

As if on cue, Frixio appeared from the branches overhead, fluttering down over the tents and right down between her and Komuxio, gazing at them both as if he couldn’t be more pleased to see them both there.

“This one is pleased to see walking one again,” Frixio informed her politely, “Welcome to the home of these ones.”

Before she had a chance to explain why she was here, she saw two others approach from behind and she turned in time to see Papalymo and Yda having arrived.

“There you are, Claire,” Papalymo greeted her warmly as they stepped over to greet them. “We have been hearing tell of your deeds of derring-do. Well done!”

“Ah, the walking ones who aided Noraxia! This one is grateful,” Frixio said with a thankful smile as Yda giggled and Papalymo nodded in return.

“A pleasure to have been of service. If you do not mind my asking, how did your misadventure come about?” Papalymo asked him as Claire bit back a retort. Sure… now they find themselves helpful.

“This one does not mind,” Frixio replied. “The misadventures, as walking one calls them, of this one began when imperial ones entered the wood. Fearing trouble, these ones decided to watch imperial ones closely. But these ones watched too closely, and imperial ones noticed and tried to catch these ones.” He shook his head, marveling at his own foolishness and finished, “Having nowhere else to hide, this one fled into Toto-Rak. Would that this one had not. In Toto-Rak, a sinister one robed in black tried to feed this one to a many-legged one!”
“A sinister one robed in black…? Why do I have the feeling I should be more worried about that than I am?” Yda frowned at that.

Claire really wanted to ask more about these strange… masked men. What was it that he called themselves? Ascians?

“Elder Frixio, we come to you as emissaries of the nation of Gridania,” Papalymo spoke up before she had a chance to, “This missive bears the words of the Elder Seedseer.”

Oh, right! After all that happened, she had almost completely forgotten about the letter and she quickly fished it out of her pocket and held it out for Frixio. The elder looked at it curiously before he opened it and began to read over whatever was written there. After several minutes of silence, giving him time to read the whole thing and ponder over the meaning, Frixio nodded in understanding.

“This one sees…” he said, “So walking ones of Gridania are fearful of Lord Ramuh.”

“Plainly put, yes,” Papalymo reminded them. “Your people summoned the Lord of Levin but once, yet that single occurrence occasioned great alarm.”

“But it’s not as if the Gridanians dislike you or anything,” Yda quickly added, “Actually, it’s just the opposite. They think of you as friends, and they don’t want anything to get in the way of that. That’s why the Elder Seedseer wrote to you.”

“Hmmm…” Frixio muttered thoughtfully, “This one well knows and respects horned one Kan-E-Senna. Be assured: like walking ones of Gridania, these ones have no desire for conflict. These one resorted to summoning Lord Ramuh to protect the wood from imperial ones. This one counseled against doing so, but was not heeded. Against this one’s wishes, Lord Ramuh was summoned…and all those ones who took part became touched ones.”

Though they have heard of this Lord Ramuh before, Claire still had no face to put to the name and she was finding it very irritating that she knew nothing more about it. Just then, however, an image came to her mind. Though she could not see it clearly through the bright light through the trees, she had the fleeting image of a towering elderly man with a voluminous beard that flowed about him much like the long, black robes he was wearing.

She blinked and the image of the staff-carrying old man vanished from her mind and felt as if she just missed something important. She gazed around, trying to remember what happened when Frixio’s voice distracted her otherwise occupied mind. Could the Echo have done something…?

“These ones want so desperately to turn touched ones back to normal ones, but did not know how — and still do not know,” Frixio said mournfully, “Touched ones, meanwhile, wanted to turn these ones into touched ones, and did know how… So this one fled to Little Solace with all those ones who did not wish to be bound to Lord Ramuh.”

So they fled for the sake of saving their own sanity and free wills? That thought brought a deep sadness to her just thinking about it.

Frixio sighed as he finished, “But walking ones of Gridania need not fear touched ones or Lord Ramuh. Unlike other primal ones, Lord Ramuh is not callous and cruel. So long as walking ones do not trespass on these ones’ ancestral homeland, where touched ones reside, walking ones will not suffer thunderous judgment.”

Well, that’s a good thing. She sighed in relief, glad to hear that she wouldn’t be asked to fight
another primal again so soon… all they had to do was make sure that they don’t trespass upon the Sylphlands and they should be good.

Perhaps the gods could show some mercy after all.

“But this one has spoken enough of touched ones,” Frixio said in determination, “This one would speak instead of these ones. As this one said, these ones desire peace with walking ones of Gridania. And so these ones ask for a chance to set things right.”

Set things right? How were they supposed to do something like that?

Papalymo suddenly turned back to Claire and spoke, as if figuring that she was wondering that same thing. “By way of an addendum, mortals who are tempered come to take on the qualities embodied by the primal in question. In the case of the Sylphs, Ramuh’s influence has made them fiercely protective of their homeland.”

Yes, that she could picture, but how were they supposed to change that? She had thought that once one was tempered by a primal there was no way to free them?

“That explains why they’re so hostile towards trespassers, but what about the abductions?” Yda asked curiously.

“A fine question, Yda!” Papalymo raised a finger, and he then went into a rant, “The abductions are, I believe, an expression of the tempered Sylphs’ desire for reconciliation—another quality traditionally associated with Ramuh. In the crudest manner imaginable, they seek to bring their fellows back into the fold. A timely reminder that the challenges posed by each primal are unique.”

Then why not just say that? Not for the first time, she wondered what she had gotten herself into with these strange people.

Papalymo turned back to Frixio and said, “Elder Frixio, we thank you for making your will known to us. The people of Gridania will rest easier in the knowledge that they and the Sylphs are united in their desire for peace.”

“Wishing to cooperate, this one has written down the feelings of these ones,” Frixio smile back, “Please see that these feelings are conveyed to horned one Kan-E-Senna.”

He then pulled a small message from the crumbled leaves of his clothes before holding them out for Claire to take. She took the tiny scroll and tucked it away safely.

“And with that,” Papalymo said with a tone of finality, “I believe we can lay the matter of Ramuh to rest.”

“That Sylph elder’s very reasonable, I must say. You could learn a lot from him,” Yda pointed out.

Papalymo huffed before glaring back up at her and retorted, as if unable to believe she just said that, “Was that a jibe? If so, I feel it only fair to observe that one of us wouldn’t recognize reason if it punched her on the nose. Did I say fair? I meant: reasonable.”

Yda stomped her foot, crossing her arms and turning to Claire, determined to leave here with some of her dignity still intact. “Anyway,” she told them, making it clear that they were not to mention the fight, “We’re going to head back to the Waking Sands and tell Minfilia all about it.”

“Fear not — we will be sure to mention the instrumental part you played in all of this,” Papalymo added in reassurance. “And while we see to that, we should appreciate it if you would deliver
Frixio’s missive to the Adder’s Nest.”

She nodded, glad to have an excuse to take her time in returning to the Waking Sands; wanting to finish cleaning the slime off her before then.

Papalymo turned back to Frixio as he finished with a bow, “Elder Frixio, we humbly thank you for your time. It has been an honor.”

Frixio bounced about in midair as he answered, “The honor is this one’s. Together, let the walking ones of Gridania and these ones find a way to live in peace.”

The Sylphs were more than happy to wave them off after that, with the two pausing only to wave back as they headed off. Claire fought a yawn as she made to leave as well… at least, until…

“Please wait, walking one Claire.”

She paused at her name and looked back to see that the elder was still observing her with those kind eyes. He did not speak right away, though, and she had the impression that he was waiting for Yda and Papalmyo to be out of earshot for when he next spoke, it was when the three of them were alone.

“This one has yet to give walking one a token of this one’s appreciation,” he told her.

That took her by surprise.

“—Oh! Oh, you don’t have to…” Claire protested, suddenly feeling very embarrassed. But Frixio was still smiling with that knowing glance—as if he knew something that she did not yet realize—as he held out a tiny hand. She watched as, to her amazement, a spark of lightning suddenly erupted around his fingers. Her eyes widened as with a crackle and a sizzling sound, a crystal appeared out of nowhere and she felt her heart skip a beat at the sight of it.

Her hand instinctively went up to her chest to where her other two crystal were nestled safely as she stared at the new crystal—nearly identical to the ones she carried.

“Is that…?” she began, not sure what else to say and her words died on their way out of her mouth. But Frixio was still smiling as he looked fondly on at the crystal, as if he could feel a sensation of comfort from it.

“When these ones summoned Lord Ramuh, these ones were gifted this crystal,” he said when he looked to her, “This one would now bestow the crystal upon walking one as a symbol of these ones’ trust.”

She made to refuse such a gift, to insist that he keep it. But then, to everyone’s surprise, the crystal suddenly left the elder’s hands of its own accord. She could tell because she saw how the elder’s eyes widened slightly… and the three of them watched as it floated upwards and drifted towards her. Claire did not even realize that her hands were already up, as if welcoming an old friend home after a long time away.

Just as it happened before, her vision left her so that she was in the darkness once again. This strange, but comforting darkness that stretched on around her into what felt like an infinite void while her hands held onto the crystal that was now sparking with energy. She could feel the heat, very different from the crystal she won from Ifrit, but in a good way as well. While the red crystal she held burned like the fading embers of a comforting fire, this was almost bursting with a wild kind of energy that reminded her of storm clouds and rain. She could feel the very charge of it rushing through her body and fill every portion until she felt that she could run and never grow
tired. She smiled at that as the crystal joined the others upon the sigil beneath her feet.

A third space that had once been empty now broke free and a pillar of lightning rose up along with the blue waves and crackling fires.

She did not wish to leave this peaceful place, but soon she felt herself returning to the waking world just she heard a gasp of surprise from somewhere nearby.

“This one was not mistaken about walking one.”

The sound of the voice was enough to cause her to open her eyes and she looked up to see that elder Frixio was staring at her through wide eyes filled with astonishment.

“Walking one is destined to walk a fate far crueler than this one can imagine,” he said almost reverently as he continued to observe her, “A brilliant light from within walking one enveloped the crystal — this one saw.”

“A light?” she repeated, almost in a daze as he spun about in the air.

“Mark this one well: that crystal will one day be of use to walking one. Walking one must keep that crystal safe at all times,” he told her in a tone that clearly meant that he was not playing around here.

Claire nodded in understanding, feeling the light weight of the new crystal now entering her heart to join the other two.

“I will,” she promised as the vow seemed to bring joy to the elder. While she wasn’t sure just what these crystals were for just yet, she knew that they needed to be hidden and protected. The power she could feel from these tiny things was enough to cause her to become light-headed and dizzy, but she had to keep them safe until she could figure out what to do with them.

Before she left, Komuxio asked her for one last favor—to observe the tempered Sylphs from back in the deeper part of the Sylphlands. Usually, the tempered ones had little love for mankind yet were content to be left alone in their own borders. Claire decided that she would watch them for a while, just to be able to confirm it with her own eyes to the Adder’s Nest. So long as they left the Sylphlands alone, then they shouldn’t have anything to fear from Lord Ramuh.

As she left, heading up through the village towards the bridge that connected them to the Sylphlands, the elder seemed almost transfixed by her movements until Komuxio turned to him.

“Elder?” Komuxio questioned him, “Where did the crystal go? This one saw the crystal… but then didn’t see it! What happened?”

“This one believes this was why this one was spared being eaten by many-legged one in Toto-Rak,” Frixio stated softly. “When this one was first gifted the crystal from Lord Ramuh, this one long since was tormented with what to do with it. This one feared what would become of these ones should that crystal be left without a strong one to keep its powers in check.”

“Elder, that crystal was gifted by Lord Ramuh! Yet it was not meant for these ones?” Komuxio questioned curiously.

“No, Komuxio,” he said, turning back to look at the younger Sylph, who was blinking in confusion. “That crystal was not many like others… only one chosen could hope to use it for good. This one… this one was not one of chosen ones. This one was permitted to guard until crystal found a new guardian. And found one it did in walking one.”
“For what purpose?” Komuxio questioned in confusion.

“This one does not yet know,” Frixio confessed. “But these ones part is not over yet. These ones must now always watch over brave walking one. Brave one Claire was chosen by the crystal. This one knows it! This one believes! The light walks with walking one and will one day shine over us all. That is why these ones must always be there to watch over brave one.”

“Yes, elder one!” Komuxio said happily, jumping for joy. “Walking one is destined to bring these ones and other walking ones together! This one believes it to!”

The elder nodded with a smile as a new feeling, one that he had not felt in such a long time, filled his heart. It was what the Walking Ones would call… hope.

*Claire*

Commander Heuloix was waiting for her by the time she returned to the Adder’s Nest, and when he received the message from Elder Frixio, he couldn’t have looked more pleased with the outcome. He glanced over the message himself very briefly before nodding in satisfaction at whatever was read there.

“So the Sylphs have no desire for conflict, nor do they intend to summon Ramuh. And so long as we leave the tempered ones be, we need not fear any aggression on their part. The Elder Seedseer will be overjoyed to hear that the Sylphs have welcomed our overtures,” he said as he lowered the message and gave her a proud smile, “And in the knowledge that they bear us no ill will, we may channel our resources towards tackling the more conspicuous threats to our security.”

Good for them. That’s one less thing they need to be worried about.

Still, Claire wasn’t so willing to put the matter of Ramuh to rest. For the more she thought about it, while she was certain they could trust the Sylph’s of Little Solace… the tempered ones may be more of a problem down the road.

Not only that, but the threat of this masked mage she met in Toto-Rak…? Just thinking about him was enough to cause her skin to crawl.

Still, she did not take that new joy away from the commander as he continued smiling.

“You have done our nation a great service, Miss Claire. It will not be forgotten,” he promised.

She forced herself to smile back, despite the unease still weighing in the pit of her stomach, as she replied, “I was only too glad to be of service, Commander.”

“The Scions have gained a valuable member,” he told her sincerely as he thanked the Scions once again and asked that she pass on his regards to Minfilia.

As if on cue, her linkpearl pulsed in her ear and she heard Minfilia’s voice ask, “Hello? Hello, Claire? Can you hear me? It is I, Minfilia.”

Really? And her she thought that she was hearing from the Sultana herself.

“I can hear you,” Claire responded calmly.

“Ah, good. Yda and Papalymo returned some little while ago. And they wasted no time in regaling me with the tale of your exploits. Thanks in large part to you, the name of one primal may be struck from our list of enemies, and the Gridanians may turn their attention to more pressing
matters. Well done!” Minfilia told her and she could hear the pride over the linkpearl. “Yet the end of one tale is but the start of another. Pray return to the Waking Sands at your earliest convenience. I would apprise you of the present situation in person.”

Couldn’t she just tell her now?

Oh well.

She agreed in the end, thanking the commander before she went running off to the airship docks to take her back to Limsa so that she could take a ferry straight over to Vesper Bay. They should really look into easier forms of travel to that place.

*Thancred*

“Perhaps, it would do thee a world of good for you to rest?” Urianger questioned him as Thancred yawned, rubbing his tired eyes, who were starting to go cross from all the reading he had been doing.

“Are you suddenly trying to stop working?” Thancred asked in annoyance as he tried to read the passage… only to realize that he had been rereading it almost five times in a row and his brain was not able to grasp what was being said anymore due to his lack of sleep.

“Nay, in truth, I draw no joy from watching you push yourself to the brink of exhaustion, my friend,” he answered simply as Thancred was nodding off in his seat. “I am certain our dear antecedent would not wish to see you in such a state…?”

“I’ll be fine,” Thancred said, fighting and failing, to hide a yawn.

“Then thou would not be opposedth to the idea of mine informing Minfilia of how poorly you are treating thyself?” Urianger questioned before Thancred stood up.

“Allright,” he bit back crossly, “If it makes you happy, I’ll be sure to rent a room in Ul’dah. I need to return some of these tomes back to The Thaumaturge’s Guild anyway, I’ll get some sleep there. Is that enough for you? Gods, Urianger, I’m working as hard as I can here and…?”

“I do not mean to imply that you are not giving our case all you have and more,” Urianger reminded him calmly in that usual grim tone of his, “Tis your well-being I am concerned with. You are a valuable member and we…?”

“You need me at my best,” Thancred said, as he ran a tired hand through his hair. “Alright, you win. I promise that after I drop these books off, I will get some rest.”

“Perhaps twould be better if thou got some rest before returning these tomes to where they are needed?” he offered as Thancred shook his head, having muttered that he promised to return these books to the guild in person. Not that they were very informative anyway. He had gone through all the books that even mentioned these mysterious Paragons, but nothing he found nothing that could help him get any closer to figuring out just what was going on.

He was still fighting his yawns even after he left the Waking Sands, too tired to even teleport back to Ul’dah. He suddenly had an idea of riding along in a carriage, thinking that he would be able to get some sleep on his way back to town when…?

He saw something moving out of the corner of his eyes. He looked, not really caring at that moment, before he felt an uneasy sensation in the air. He frowned as he continued looking, not sure what it was that he was supposed to be searching for. That was when he remembered his handy
new device on his arm and pulled it off to look through it… his skills of sensing aether pale in comparison to one such as Y’shtola… but he liked to think that his senses from years of growing up as a street urchin were top notch.

As he looked around, he could see the streams of aether drifting about them, most of them calm and normal-looking… at least to his eyes… except for…?

He frowned when he could see that there was most certainly some sense of disturbance in the aether farther out to the north of here. Curious, he returned the tomes to Tataru, asking her to find someone to return them in his stead, for he suddenly had a lead.

He ran out before she could even question him, but he didn’t care. His energy was suddenly back and he was now on the trail of something big, he was sure of this. He quickly left Vesper Bay and followed the trails of aether—which seemed to be moving someplace further away.

This was strange since Ifrit was destroyed and the aether that it had sucked dry should have returned to the land… wait… no, that wasn’t the problem. He could tell that the aether was flowing normally, but there was some sort of… blockage to the north of here that was starting to interrupt the flow. That couldn’t be good… at best, it was just some reckless thaumaturge who was experimenting with some new spell… at worst… another primal could be close to appearing in this world. He continued on foot for most of the rest of the way, pausing just before he reached the norther parts of Thanalan. He rarely had any reason to go to these parts, what with the Immortal Flames keeping an eye on the Garleans and lack of beast tribes there was little that needed to be done here.

But as he scoured the land, he managed to follow the trail to where he thought that it was getting thicker. He approached and looked down into a deep valley where, a Hyuran man by the looks of him, was standing there, cloaked in thick black robes. He crouched down behind some rocks and watched as the man turned on the spot, as if observing his surroundings… that was where Thancred got a good look at the man’s face… or lack-there-of.

Instead he was wearing a solid black mask with no other features, covering his entire face.

Thancred frowned slightly, finding this odd. He was almost willing to bet that this man wasn’t a man at all, but one of the Paragons that he had been studying up so much for. Yet, he still had a shadow? Though it was hard to tell since the skies in this part of Norther Thanalan were always cloaked in thick clouds, but he could tell that this man most certainly had a shadow, at least judging from the light coming from the corrupted crystals that stood next to him. Not only that, the Paragons that he heard of wore red masks, not black. Was it possible that he was some sorcerer with a strange fashion sense or maybe one of the Alacran criminals, perhaps?

Thancred crouched there for only a few minutes, for the masked man seemed to be looking for something. Thancred dared to creep closer as he saw the man pull something out from his pocket and seemed to be observing it with utter reverence… as if he was holding onto a priceless treasure. Thancred could not see what it was from here. But as he dared to get closer, he stepped on a twig and it snapped.

Though it wasn’t loud, it was enough to catch the masked man’s attention, who quickly hid the thing in his hands as he spun about and looked up. Though Thancred could not see his face… he wasn’t even sure the man had eyeholes through the mask, but he was sure that he was now looking up at him.

He could see that he was speaking, almost to himself, but he held up his hands just as Thancred clenched his knifes, knowing that he had only seconds to prevent the mage from weaving his spells
together. He launched himself off the wall of the cliff and closed the distance between them as he ran with his blades drawn.

Suddenly, he felt as something went crashing into him off from the side. Thancred hit the ground hard and tasted blood in his mouth as the air was knocked out of his lungs. He coughed, rolling back to his feet as dark aether was now surrounding the mage as he began to chant. Thancred could not understand a word that he was saying, he just knew he didn’t like what was being said.

The mage clearly did not expect him to be getting up that quickly though, and Thancred surprised him with his speed as he dashed back in. He then slashed at the man’s chest, giving him a deep enough wound to have knocked him down but not to kill… at least, for a normal man. But the man just leapt back from him, the dark aether still flowing about him as he moved with a speed that Thancred had never seen before in someone other than himself.

He had to be wearing some kind of armor beneath those robes, but then how could he be moving so fast? Surely he would be worn down by all those layers? That was when the masked man slashed at him with claw-like hands… with Thancred only moving back in time to avoid getting his face scratched. But he could feel the wind from the attack hit his face, and he could see that instead of claws, there were armor plates upon his hands and fingers, as deadly as his knives.

Thancred ducked down and rolled when he hit the ground, all but spinning as he managed to get behind the man and stabbed him in the back, only for the man to slash at the air once more. This time, Thancred felt the scratch at his neck and he gritted his teeth, knowing that he was bleeding. That was when he felt as that invisible force from before hit him once more, this time in the back of the heads, and he could have sworn he saw little chocobo chicks floating about his head as he hit the ground.

Thancred reached out, desperate to grab the mage from escaping… but he felt his fingers slipping through the dark robes as the figure was there one moment and then go another. Thancred coughed as he laid on the ground, dazed and confused as he spit out a little blood from his mouth and raised his head to daze around.

Only to realize that in those few seconds he was down, the mage managed to escape.

Fury and self-loathing filled his very soul as he spun about, cursing at everything in sight. This had been his best lead in weeks! He was so close to being able to capture that bastard and questioning him! Just to talk to him and get something could have gotten him somewhere with this investigation besides being stuck reading over countless tomes and getting nowhere.

Once he spared any breath he had, he tried to calm himself, reminding him that he did, at least, was able to confirm that there was someone out there who was causing trouble with the flow of the aether and that was not something.

He had to try and focus on the good here, not just the bad… he had to get back and tell the others. Though no sooner did he think that did he realize that he would have to bear witness to their looks of disappointment that the masked man got away from them. No… he couldn’t go back empty handed! He had to find something… anything…?

That was when something glinted darkly out of the corner of his eyes and he turned to look, realizing that the dark sorcerer had dropped something.

He cautiously approached, having a hand on one of his daggers just to be on the safe side, as he looked down at the cloth that had something wrapped in it. He carefully poked at it with the tip of his knife and watched as the cloth fell off it to reveal… a crystal.
He blinked at that as he took his goggles out once more and observed it, knowing that this had to be something important to the masked man? But as he observed it, it seemed to be no different than from any other crystal… just that it was black? No strange or unusual disturbances in the aether about it?

Frowning he felt that it was safe enough to take and wrapped it back up in the cloth so that he could take it back with him. It was slightly cool to the touch and he could feel it pressed into his fingertips as he observed just how a dark kind of light seemed to drift about it.

He shook himself out of his darker thoughts as he continued to go through the encounter in his mind. And the more he thought about it, the more he was willing to bet that this man was up to something bad. Perhaps it had been a Black Mage or one of the bandits of the Alacran, but he was all but certain that he had something to do with the Paragons.

He wasn’t sure how he knew, he just sensed it more than anything. He gazed down at the dark crystal that he managed to steal from the man and saw how his own face was reflected in the dark facets of the crystal and he carefully tucked it away, making sure to show Minfilia as soon as he good back.

*Waking Sands*

“So there were troubles concerning the Sylphs?” Alphinaud had asked Minfilia when he entered the Waking Sands, a couple weeks after he and his sister went their separate ways. He was with Minfilia, Y’shtola, Yda, and Papalymo as they were discussing everything that had been happening as of late.

“Well, we know now that they are more likely to embrace peace than shun it,” Minfilia confessed. “Which is a great load off our minds. At least for now.”

“But they summoned Ramuh once before, did they not?” he asked.

“Yes, and that is where the confusion started from,” she told him. “Gridania was terrified that the Sylphs will resort to summoning their primal sometime in the near future. But at the same time, the Elder Seedseer did not wish to break the treaty between their people. They have enough problems with the Ixal and Garuda, who is one of them most savage and terrible of all the primals that we are aware of.”

“And that is why the Elder Seedseer had asked for assistance?” Alphinaud asked. He knew that this was a delicate situation and if they were to win the Sylphs favor, they would have to be as diplomatic as possible. “And… let me guess… you sent Claire off ahead to investigate?”

“She had the best chances out of any of us to win their favor,” Minfilia answered. “She had been spending much time in Gridania and Little Solace for these last few weeks.” She then looked up to Papalymo and Yda and added, “As well as you two. You were just finishing up on the matter, were you not?”

“It went about as well as we could have hoped for,” Papalymo smiled. “It turns out that the reason the Sylphs had been acting so strangely as of late were for two reasons. One of which is that there were imperial soldiers in the Twelveswood.”

“Soldiers?” Alphinaud asked in surprise. “What were they doing there?”

“We’re not quite aware of the reason for that just yet,” Papalymo confessed.

“Yeah, but we do know is that they were capturing Sylphs,” Yda piped up. “And to make matters
worse, the Sylph Elder went missing because of the imperials trying to catch him.”

“Yes, thank you, Yda,” Papalymo said firmly, clearly not appreciating being interrupting like that. “The point is, to escape the Garleans from capturing him, he fled into an abandoned dungeon called Toto-Rak and was almost killed there. But thankfully Claire took care of it and rescued the elder in the process. Thanks to her we were able to bring Elder Frixio back to his people and resolve the matter peacefully. She had stayed behind a little longer to bring a message from the Sylphs to the Elder Seedseer. The Sylphs seemed to have grown quite fond of her in the time that she stayed with them.”

“Yeah, they looked kinda sad to see her go,” Yda laughed. “I think if they could’ve, they would have her live there with them in the trees. Funny thing is though, they didn’t seem nearly as sad to see me and Papalymo go…?”

“Good thing for us then that they understood that we need her as well,” Papalymo answered. “And I have to say that it was nice to work with someone who isn’t such a scatterbrain. Unlike some here I could mention.”

“Who?” Yda asked curiously.

“You just proved my point,” he responded.

“HEY!” Yda yelled back.

“And the second reason for the Sylphs hostility?” Y’shtola asked, breaking them up before it turned into a fight.

“Right, well, the second is that many Sylphs, all those who took part in summoning Lord Ramuh the last time, were tempered,” Papalymo informed them.

“Well, that explains a lot,” Y’shtola sighed grimly.

“Yes,” Papalymo told her sadly. “We have written it all down in a report so that you can read it later. But for now, disaster is averted and everything worked out better than we had hoped.”

*Meanwhile upstairs*

Tataru was happily waiting for her when she entered the Waking Sands, waving merrily and telling her that Minfilia was expecting her.

When she approached the doors to the solar, however, she got a surprise in the form of a familiar face. She paused for just a moment when she saw that same young Elezen that she met during the remembrance speeches in each of the city states. What was his name again…?

Alphinaud. That was it.

And he seemed to be alone today, she could not see his sister Alisaie anywhere, at least. She stared at him in surprise as he walked past, turning to smile at her quite mischievously in the process. She watched him go, not really sure why he was here when…?

“It is good to see you again, Claire!” Minfilia’s voice called, getting her attention and Claire looked back to see the others all waiting there for her. When she entered the room, she found Y’shtola there with Yda and Papalymo as well… even Biggs and Wedge in the corner of the room as they worked quietly with each other as they seemed to be studying up on some blueprints for some new invention.
“I have been looking forward to congratulating you on your triumph in the Twelveswood,” Minfilia said happily, “Owing to your efforts, conflict has been averted. Truly, you have done the Scions proud.”

Claire felt herself shift uncomfortably at the praise, though no one seemed to notice.

“With that,” Papalymo added confidently, “we can strike Ramuh from the list.”

“So who’s next?” Yda asked with an eager edge to her voice, “The Sahagin and Leviathan?”

“The Lord of the Whorl has not answered his minions’ call of late, nor is he expected to do so in the near future,” Papalymo countered and Claire felt dread at the thought of another primal. Gods, how many were there?

“While the Sahagin remain as aggressive as ever, they lack the quantity of crystals required to call for their god,” Papalymo informed them, “As with the Sylphs, we can leave them to their own devices…for a time, at least.”

“For a time’ bears repeating,” Y’shtola added dryly. “We can ill afford to fall complacent.”

“It is as Y’shtola says,” Papalymo agreed, “Unless we know the minds of the beast tribes, we cannot predict with any certainty when next a primal will return to plague the land. This being the case, we must proceed with as much haste as prudence allows.”

“Well…” Yda said, not liking the suddenly grim tone this conversation was heading towards, “Any word on Titan?”

“The Maelstrom keeps the kobolds under constant observation,” Y’shtola replied as calmly as ever. “We shall here from them ere long, you may depend upon it.”

Claire really did not like how she said that. Nor it would seem did Papalymo, who was tapping his chin in thought as he added in thought, “Indeed. So, then — of all the known primals that have been active in recent times, we are left with…”

“Gridania!” Yda exclaimed without thinking before she cleared her throat and exclaimed, “Wait, I mean Garuda — who is the primal of the Ixal who live in Gridania. Yes, that’s what I meant.”

“So many malms to cover…” Minfilia sighed. “Would that there were a more efficient way to conduct our surveys. Were he still with us, we should not long have wanted for a more practicable solution…”

“She’s not wrong there…” Claire heard Biggs sigh as well from his spot in the corner. “Where in the world are you, Chief?”

Who? Who were they talking about?

But as if determined to find some good despite all this uncertainty, Minfilia smiled back and answered, “But one sure step at a time! Henceforth, the Order of the Twin Adder will handle all matters pertaining to the Sylphs, under the sage guidance of the Seedseers. I bid you all enjoy a moment’s respite. You have earned it!”

That seemed to be enough for the others, for they were all leaving, already talking about their next assignments and what to do until then.

Yet as the others left the room, Claire paused — wondering if she should tell the others what
happened while she was in Toto-Rak. She wanted to think that this masked mage was no threat… but with Hydaelyn speaking in her ear, warning her of the darkness, she had to believe that there was much more to this tale than she first knew. She turned back to Minfilia, who looked politely puzzled.

“Is there something else, Claire?” she asked her.

Claire hesitated for just another brief moment before she sighed and nodded and explained everything that she left out in the report. That while she was in Toto-Rak, just before she recused Elder Frixio, she encountered a black-robed man who wore a red mask. How he called himself Lahabrea and of Hydaelyn’s warning to her before the man disappeared. When she finished, Minilia was looking horrified by what she just heard.

“A man named Lahabrea, sporting a red mask…?” she repeated, as if making sure that she had heard him right, “Twelve preserve…”

Claire frowned, not sure she liked the worry in her eyes as she asked, “Do you know him?”

She shook her head but still looked worried as she answered, “Prior to the Calamity, the Ascians took great pains to remain hidden… Why would they choose to cast off their veil of secrecy now? Gods, this bodes ill…”

Ascians? What were those?

But Minfilia seemed to be completely lost in thought as she looked back and went on speaking with urgency in her voice.

“We must take advantage of the present lull in primal hostilities and investigate this Lahabrea — learn all we can of him and his designs. I dread to thi—” she began, but she never got any further in her discussion because she was interrupted by a scream of terror from outside the solar.

“Tataru!” Minfilia exclaimed as they both bolted to the door. They burst through, into the hallway, quickly followed by many of the other Scions as they found Tataru at the foot of the stairs… on the floor and shaking with more of shock than fright.

For there… floating in the air above her was a Sylph. One with a large leave worn over her face as a mask, with holes cut into it for her to see through… wait… Claire realized she had seen that mask before…?

“A Sylph…in Thanalan?” Minfilia gasped, now looking completely baffled by this.

The Sylph – whom she now recognized as the Sylph Noraxia – ignored everyone’s shock as she looked straight at Claire.

“At long last, this one finds walking one Claire!” she said happily, “This one is most dependable of these ones! Is sent by Elder Frixio to help walking ones!” Then, as if fearing she had been rude, she glanced back down at Tataru as she added, “This one is called Noraxia. This one comes as a friend. Let these ones be friends!”

Slowly, Tataru got back to her feet. While still undeniably nervous, the shock of seeing such a new ‘guest’ seemed to be wearing off enough for her to stutter out, “P-Pleasure to meet you…Noraxia.”

Once everything settled down, many of the Scions gathered around Noraxia, more curious than anything else—with many never having even seen a Sylph before. Claire could only smile as she watched on, feeling glad that she wouldn’t have to say goodbye to the Sylph’s yet.
Though she went where she was needed most… though she was still deeply troubled by this black-robed Lahabrea… it was good to know that they has such a collection of allies to help figure this out.
Chapter Summary

One would think that slaying a good and saving the Sylphs would count for something these days. But no, another duty calls and Claire sets off once again, ready to look into her first solo mission in discovering the truth behind a mysterious masked man. Eventually, her search takes her to Little Ala Mhigo and even to a string of murders where the victims have all had their faces torn clean off. Will she discover the truth behind these incidents? Or will she be the next victim?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Thancred! What happened to you?!”

“There’s no need to worry about me,” Thancred promised, trying to clear off some of the dirt that stubbornly remained on his cheek. After his run in with the masked mage, he had returned as soon as he could to inform the others about what he saw. As soon as he entered the room though, all it took was for Minfilia to see his dirty face and torn shirt before she immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion that he needed medical care.

“Truly, Minfilia, I am doing well,” he added as she insisted on calling Y’shtola in to look at him. After reassuring her that he was still whole and hale, she sighed, but still demanded that she examine him herself to be sure. So that was how he found himself setting on the bench in her office as she gently began to clean the dirt off his face. She frowned slightly as her fingers trailed lightly over the slight bruise on his forehead, but otherwise found nothing else the matter with him.

“What happened?” she asked again.

“I was just about to take some tomes back to Ul’dah when I spotted a man in black leaving Vesper Bay,” he answered as he patiently sat there and let her clean him up. “I suppose you could say that curiosity got the better of me and followed him. While I cannot be sure yet, I am all but convinced that he may be one of the Paragons.”

“He was?” she gasped, removing the cloth and stared at him, “Then what in Hydaeyln’s name were you thinking in following him on your own?”

He merely smiled back as he rested his hand upon her shoulder in a reassuring way as he promised, “I was just following him. I was only spotted due to a careless mistake on my part, on that I can admit. But he seemed more frightened of me than I was of him.”

He may be exaggerated on that last part, but he didn’t want to see her worry over him like this.

“If that man was indeed a Paragon, then we must needs be more careful,” Minfilia scolded him, “Nothing that you could have gained from following him would be worth your wellbeing. Please, at least speak with Y’shtola on your health and…?”

But he was shaking his head firmly.
He was truly touched by how worried that Minfilia was for him, but this was too important to get sidetracked. He knew he could do this, he just needed to be more careful… that was all. Perhaps his lack of sleep was what was caused his foot to slip earlier? Either way, he would make sure that it never happened again.

Minfilia pleaded with him so much, however, that he finally gave in, just to give her peace of mind. He went to go and speak with Y’shtola just as Claire arrived to speak with Minfilia on some important matter. Like he thought, when he went to Y’shtola, and she finished her examination, she found nothing other than the bruise.

“What worries me is that you don’t seem to be getting enough sleep,” she informed him once she was done. “I understand that it’s important to you, but you must remember to rest more often than you have been.”

Thancred nodded, promising her that he would after she ushered him out; where he was starting to feel the full effects of his sleepless nights catching up to him. He was just in the mind to see if it would be alright for him to go to their small infirmary and see if he could catch a few hours of rest when…?

His hand brushed against something in his pocket and he froze at the reminder of what he picked up earlier. He had somehow completely forgotten about the crystal he found! He made to return to the Solar to speak with Minfilia when he stumbled and almost fell over. His hand reached up to his head as he felt a splitting ache beginning to grow. He shook his head, breathing hard through his mouth as to not be sick.

On second thought, perhaps it would be wiser to rest now and explain what he found later?

*Claire*

Claire was given several days off from her duties as a reward for her time spent with the Sylphs, and she was glad for the break. Not to say that she had been idle during that time. She began her practicing with the sword at the gladiator’s guild and she was pleased to see how well it was going. In fact, it was with her new blade, that she forged herself under her studies with the blacksmith’s guild in Limsa did she finally return to the Waking Sands to see how everything was going. When she entered, she found everything much the same way as she left it—with only a few differences.

Now, they had the friendly green Noraxia floating about as she examined everything in their headquarters, and quickly winning the hearts of the other Scions scattered about. She also found Biggs and Wedge usually hard at work in a corner of the room as they went over different types of blueprints. Meanwhile, she found most of the other Scions hard at work with other tasks, usually with their heads buried in a tome as they studied up on some manner of subject.

All but for one.

Now that she thought about it, she couldn’t even remember the last time she had seen Thancred and she could not help but feel concern for the man’s ever growing absence.

“I understand your concern,” Papalymo sighed when she asked him about it, “But Thancred has always been prone to vanishing for days at a time. I can’t say for sure what he is up to, but I do know that he was given a very important mission. One that I don’t think that we should expect him to finish in a matter of days.”

“What is he up to anyway?” Yda asked curiously, but all Papalymo could do was shrug.
But no one seemed too concerned about it, so Claire let it go as she went to the solar to see how Minfilia was doing.

“Ah, Claire. It’s good to see you!” she answered happily, but her good mood soon faded as she sighed and added, “However, I am afraid there is no rest for the weary. I know it has only been a short while, but we simply must delve further into the motivations of the masked man — the Ascian known as Lahabrea. This is an ideal moment to do so, while our hands are not bound dealing with another primal.”

Well, she supposed that made sense. She supposed if she had to choose between going out and fighting another god-like being or investigating some robed and masked mage, it really wasn’t a contest.

She shrugged, which Minfilia took as permission to fill her in on what they did manage to learn.

“At present, we know little and less about the Ascians — only that destruction follows in their wake,” she explained, “I should not be surprised if these beings are behind the chaos that racks the realm. If my fears prove to be reality, we must do all in our power to stop them.”

On second thought, perhaps it would be safer to fight against another primal.

“Earlier, I sent word to each Grand Company to solicit cooperation,” Minfilia continued. “The Immortal Flames responded to the effect that they have information on a potential sighting. This is intelligence that we can ill afford to ignore. Go speak with Flame Commander Swift at the Hall of Flames in Ul’dah to inquire further. How you go about the investigation thereafter, I leave wholly to you discretion. But whatever you do, never forget that we are dealing with the unknown. You cannot take too many precautions. Be safe, Claire.”

Well, that seemed easy enough. Other than being told to keep an eye out for anything dangerous, she seemed to have complete free reign over this situation. It would seem this would be her first solo mission since she joined the Scions and felt nerves in the pit of her stomach at the thought. She nodded in agreement, promising to keep her informed of anything she may learn.

“Thank you, Claire,” Minfilia said gratefully, “May the Crystal guide you and keep you.”

Claire paused only long enough to say goodbye to the others before she headed out to Vesper Bay. After feeling the weight of her heavy coin purse, she smiled at the thought that she would be able to afford things now. She took the fast way to Ul’da’h, by ways of a teleport, and she stepped out into the bright sunshine among the streets of Ul’da’h, just a stone’s throw away from the Hall of Flames.

She went skipping along, suddenly feeling an unusual sense of happiness today before Commander Swift waved her over.

“Ah, Claire, it’s good to see you!” he said as she approached, watching him grin from ear to ear. “Have you come on behalf of the Scions, then? About our masked friend?”

She nodded, ready to get to work, as Commander Swift cleared his throat and began to relay, “Well, as we’ve already relayed to Lady Minfilia, there has been a sighting of this rogue near about eastern Thanalan. A Brass Blade stationed at Highbridge described him in detail when he alerted us to suspicious activity.”

What did he mean by ‘suspicious’ activity? She was already starting to see warning signs about this.
“I would point you to the witness, but I’m afraid he died not two days ago, slain by a marauding horde of Qiqirn,” the commander sighed, “Fate can be a cruel mistress.”

Well of course that’s what happened. Gods forbid she have an easy time with this. Still, this all seemed a bit too… convenient to her.

“But do not be so quick to despair,” Commander Swift added, “Being an airship landing, Highbridge sees heavy traffic. Folk are always coming and going, and some among them may well have caught a glimpse of your target. You could do worse than to speak with a merchant named Hihibaru. The fellow’s always starved for customers, and he’d no doubt welcome your attention, whether or not you have coin or the mind to spend it.”

Well, that wasn’t much to go by, but it was more than she thought she would be receiving after this unfortunate turn of events. She made sure to thank the Commander before she headed out. As she left the city gates, she pulled out a small yellow whistle that was in the shape of a chocobo and blew hard. She didn’t have to wait long, for her new mount came racing in towards her.

Claire beamed happily as the Chocobo kwehed with it saw her, pausing only long enough to rub his feathered head against hers. She laughed as she reached up to pet the beak fondly, making sure to pull out some greens from her pocket to feed to him in gratitude before she pulled herself up onto his back.

After joining her Grand Company, she was thrilled at the news that she would be allowed to obtain a Chocobo mount for her very own. After saving up enough seals, she bought herself a license before heading off to speak with the Chocobo porter, who brought out a fine, healthy bird for her. As soon as he saw her, the bird quickened his steps, as if he just knew that he was meant to bear her from now on.

Claire just wrapped her arms around the bird’s slender neck and hugged him tightly, glad to have a companion on the road with her.

She smiled even wider as she ran her hand through his bright yellow feathers as she urged him along, leaving Central Thanalan Behind as they raced to the East, past Drybone, and to the bridge she had often seen in the distance but never had reason to visit before now. As it drew closer, she could see the remains of some old ruins upon the cliffs, beautifully sculpted, much like how Ul’dah was built and she wondered if the ancestors of the Ul’dahans were the ones who carved such detail? At the foot of the bridge, she saw a Lalafell on hand, who couldn’t have looked more thrilled at the thought of a potential customer.

“Welcome to Highbridge, adventurer!” he cried out with an overused grin, “Whatever you seek, I, Hihibaru, can provide it! ….Probably!”

She fought the laugh that was threatening to break free as she politely turned down his plea to buy something, and instead questioned him on if he had seen a suspicious masked man around these parts in recent days. As soon as she began to question him, she saw his wide smile quickly leave until he was left with a nervous frown.

“You’re after a masked man? I’m…not sure I have one of those in stock…” that was when he realized what he was saying and slapped his forehead, “Ohhhh, you’re after a masked man! Why didn’t you say so! Such an individual might have featured in one of the many rumors I’ve heard. If you linger awhile, mayhap you’ll learn a thing or two, eh?”

Not surprised, she shrugged and asked if there was anything happening in this area that he could tell her about.
Hihibaru thought it over for a time before informing her, “Well. When the Order of Nald’thal began excavating the ruins below, I had hopes that Highbridge would turn into a bustling hub for pilgrims. But thanks to the nigh endless beastman raids, folk are too afraid to come within a malm of here. I sold everything I owned to get my venture started, and I’m loath to give up without making an earnest effort to stick it out. But if things keep going as they are, I’ll be bankrupt before the moon is through…”

But as if he was determined to find some good of this, he cleared his throat and finished, “Whining won’t do me any good, though. No, for my business to survive, I need business. Speaking of which, perhaps you’d like to browse my wares! Spend a bit of coin to help a struggling merchant!”

She could tell that he was growing desperate at this point, but she was forced to shake her head once more as she politely insisted on any information, however vague, on this masked man. After several minutes of calm pursuing, he crossed his arms with a huff and all sense of good cheer seemed to leave him.

“…The masked man?” he demanded in irritation, “Bah, Thal take your bloody masked man! I know what I said before, but vague rumors are all I’ve got. If you want to know about him, go and ask the other merchants!”

Well, there was no need to be so rude. She waited until her back was turned before she could roll her eyes at the unhelpful merchant before she began to explore the rest of Highbridge, questioning anyone and everyone who looked like they may be able to shed some light on the situation.

After about an hour of questioning, she found out that there were no shortage of rumors. Apparently there was talk all over of a stranger wearing a black robe and red mask seen in this area recently. Though no one she spoke to seems to be able to actually confirm it with their own eyes—just hearing the whispers.

After a while, she felt that she had run out of options and returned to Hihibaru, trying to see if there was naught else he could tell her. It was with a stab of annoyance when he looked at her with a slightly smug expression when he saw her returning empty-handed.

“Judging by your expression, I take it you didn’t learn much of use,” he asked.

She shook her head, determined not to give him any satisfaction for the matter. But at that, the man seemed to realize how childish he sounded and sighed.

“Look, I’m sorry for my rudeness earlier. It’s just that things are tough for us merchants at the moment. The Qiqirn raids are so constant, so organized, that we’re beginning to suspect that someone is orchestrating it all,” he informed her, sounding apologetic, “I tend to put my own welfare first, like most of us do, but that doesn’t mean I’m a bad person.” He then thought it over for another moment before he added, “I promise to keep an eye out for your masked man. If I see or hear anything, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Thank you,” she replied, knowing that it was the best that she could do for now. Unwilling to leave the area with nothing, however, she decided to stay for a time and see if there was aught she could do to help the people around here. She wasn’t surprised to find that there was no shortage of people who could always use an extra hand and she was soon put to work. She remained at the Highbridge for the next two days, finding ways to kill time and keep herself busy as she kept an eye out for this ‘masked man’.

The rumors certainly flooded in often enough, but again, the same problem was that while there was a lot of talk… she had yet to meet anyone who had seen the man for themselves. Her luck
changed however when she was passing by Hihibaru early on the third day, looking very pleased with himself.

“Ah, the investigative adventurer! Are you still on the trail of that masked man, by any chance? I happened to remember something, and would share it with you!” he said.

Truly? She had been here all this time and he only now bloody remembered?!

She immediately turned her head to him, hoping that, for his sake, that what he had to say was going to be helpful.

“You’ll recall my telling you how the Qiqirn have been raiding Highbridge nigh without cease,” he told her, “Well, there is a rumor that those filthy rats have been meeting with a great hulk of a man in secret. While I can’t say whether this is the mystery fellow you seek, I reckon it’s as good a lead as any other.”

A great hulk of a man? That certainly didn’t sound like it could be this Lahabrea character from that description? Besides, what good would he have on tempting Qiqirn to attack an outpost this far out of everyone’s way? Even if it turned out that this was another dead end, if nothing else, she would be able to make it a little safer for the merchants out here.

Shrugging at that, she waited for Hihibaru to go on, who nodded happily and answered, “According to witnesses, the rendezvous takes place in the Qiqirn lair located southeast of here. If you go there, perhaps you’ll come upon some kind of clue. Be careful, though: the nasty buggers don’t take kindly to visitors…”

So, after stretching out her arms, her hand on the sword at her hip, she headed out towards the small camp a little to the south east from the bridge. It certainly wasn’t difficult to find… all she had to do was follow the river until she came across all the Qiqirn wandering about. Rather than wasting her time and energy fighting them all off, however, she decided that she would slip in and have a look around the area first before attacking them—just in case these guys were innocent.

After searching through most of the camp, she was unable to find anything incriminating… at least until she found a letter set aside upon a crate. Curious, she looked over it, though she wasn’t able to read a single word of it.

The hand-writing was certainly very neat… which was why she found it odd to think that a Qiqirn could have written it. But she knew not which language this was either so she could not understand it in the slightest. While the Echo allowed her to understand the words of others, the same did not seem to be similar to the written word.

When she heard the Qiqirn return, she snatched the letter up and made her escape before the ratmen noticed her around their camp. She took the long way around so that she could shake off any who may have spotted her and tried to follow, before she headed back to Hihibaru; still trying to make sense of the letter in the meanwhile.

“Ah, so, did you end up investigating the Qiqirn lair?” he asked curiously, noticing the letter in her hands.

She nodded, showing it to him, wondering if he could tell her anyone who would be able to translate it for her. As he gazed over it, he surprised her by saying, “This is written in Amaljic. You’re in luck! Just so happens I learned a spot of it back in the day, so as to expand my potential clientele.”

What were the odds off that? She knew not if she was given good luck or terrible luck in recent
Mayhaps a little of both?

Hihibaru studied the letter for a short time as he pieced the words together.

“Seems like the contents pertain to…” he stated, not sounding too interested… at least until the words died in his throat and his eyes widened in horror as he read out: “Whoah! People trafficking!?”

“What?” she demanded, almost sure she heard him wrong.

“Gods be good…” Hihibaru mumbled, now turning very pale. “If I’m reading this right, the Qiqirn are trying to strike a deal with the Amal’aa. They mean to catch hapless souls at Highbridge and sell them off like sacks of popotoes!” He looked up, now shaking at the very thought and quickly began to mumble, “To think that different tribes of beastmen are colluding in their villainy… I must warn everyone to maintain vigilance!”

“Perhaps you will also need to inform the Immortal Flames?” she offered him, and Hihibaru was looking eager at that suggestion.

“You have my thanks, adventurer. Had you not braved the Qiqirn lair, no one here would have known what the creatures were plotting until they actually began picking us off, one by one,” he gulped, his hands still shaking slightly at the thought, “On the other hand… I suppose this means you’re no closer to finding your man. Well, unless it’s an Amal’aa you’re looking for. But, uh… probably not, huh?”

No… it was not. But then again, now that she thought about it, he had said that a big, ‘hulking’ fellow was seen speaking to the Qiqirn, did he not? Perhaps it was to an Amal’aa then? Still, that left her no closer to trying to figure who Lahabrea was or how to track him down. Just thinking about that cold voice and slimy smile of his was enough to make her skin crawl. There was something not right about that fiend?

Hihibaru was already making preparations to strengthen security at Highbridge. Once word had gotten out what the Qiqirn were planning, everyone was on high alert. They had even sent a messenger back to Ul’dah to request that they send out Immortal Flames or a few more Brass Blades just to patrol the areas for them. Others were already setting in new rules that one must not stray too far from the Highbridge, and to help secure the roads coming and leaving for the travelers safety.

Well, at least she seemed to have done some good around these parts.

After another night of sleeping underneath the stars, she was unable to find any other reason for remaining. As she was packing up and getting ready to leave early that next morning, she made to head down to Hihibaru to thank him for the help and to tell him to be careful. To her surprise, however, when she approach, he looked truly pleased to see her.

“My dear, thank you so much once again for warning us of the potential danger that we were all in,” he said. “The messenger had returned just minutes ago and we will be having more patrols on the road by tomorrow! However, I feel that it only right that I thank you with what you came here for.”

She blinked in confusion as he grinned.

“I’ve finally got some honest-to-gods information on your masked man!” he said, sounding so
proud of himself that it was a wonder why his buttons didn’t burst from his tunic as he swelled up. “This time, it’s the real thing, I swear! Why so confident? Because I saw him with my own two eyes!”

She blinked, completely taken aback as she asked, “H-How…?”

“It was late last night,” he explained, “I was out for an evening stroll, minding my own business, when I noticed a column of smoke rising from a cliff over at Thal’s Respite. Curious, I took myself there to find a masked man – your masked man, I’m sure of it – standing by a fire. As if in answer, some Qiqirn appeared soon after, and the group began talking at length. I’m afraid I was too far out of earshot to hear much of anything. After the group had dispersed, and idea came to me: if you were to use a smoldering coal to start a fire, you might be able to arrange a similar meeting. It will be dangerous, I shouldn’t doubt, but I’m sure you’re more than a match for a pack of rats.”

She could not have hopped for anything better!

She beamed and thanked him for all his help before she headed off. She paused only long enough by a small firepit just outside of the bridge’s perimeter so that she was able to wrap up a piece of still glowing hot coal in a piece of leather. Knowing that all she had to do was use a little bit of fire she learned while studying Thaumaturgy, she hurried off to find the spot that Hihibaru pointed out to her. After climbing up a series of boulders and rocks, she found a small patch of ashy ground in a perfect circle… as if someone had just used this place to make a fire last night.

She gathered up what was left of the ash and timber before using the coal underneath it, gently coaxing a small flame from the embers. Soon enough, she got a fire going and as she added more fuel to it, a steady string of smoke began to rise out of it.

Almost as if he had been waiting for it, a man approached from the shadows. She barely had any time to react… but as soon as the man realized that she was not at all who he thought it would be, he attacked her. Her sword was in her hands before she even knew that he had charged at her with his fists held high. After he fell… she sighed, now angry at herself that she acted so quickly without thinking. But then again, he didn’t seem like he was in the mood for talking anyway.

Still, that was when she noticed a piece of paper with a strange symbol drawn upon it sticking out from the man’s pocket. Curiously, she stepped up and picked it out, looking over the image of a… flaming stone… perhaps?

It made little sense to her. But remembering how knowledgeable that Hihibaru was last time, she felt that it was worth a shot to try and speak with him again on what he thought of this. She pocketed the piece of paper as she made her way back to the bridge.

“Back so soon?” he asked, surprised that she had returned in less than a bell’s time, “Were you able to find any clues leading to your masked man?”

“Perhaps,” she said as she pulled out the piece of paper and explained what happened when the man attacked her. Hihibaru only had to look at the image before gasping in shock.

“Th-This scroll! It bears a prayer to Rhalgr, the Destroyer!” he cried. Rhalgr? Oh, he meant one of the Twelve. She often lost track of which god was which, but she did know that Rhalgr was known as the most ‘temperamental’ of all the gods. And as far as she knew, none of the three city states had him as their patron deity?

“In case you’re unfamiliar, Rhalgr is the guardian deity of Ala Mhigo, which is currently under Garlean rule,” Hihibaru explained, “It’s highly uncommon for folk of other nations to revere Him.
I’d wager my last gil your assailant was Ala Mhigan. It seems this masked man of yours is very well connected.”

Ala Mhigo? She had yet to step foot in those lands. But she knew that such a thing was unlikely to ever happen. She remembered seeing the towering wall that cut through the East Shroud and how Ala Mhigo was on the other side of it. She did not think that it would be a wise idea to venture out that far on her own. Not since she knew she would be killed should the Garleans ever spot her.

Hihibaru shook his head as he declared, “I must confess, the merchant in me envies such a diverse network of contacts. That selfsame merchant also senses danger ahead…and darkness besides. Are you certain you’d rather not take things nice and slow here at Highbridge?”

Claire only shrugged with a hint of a smile on her face. She was not the type who liked to give up that easily. Besides, she had questions for this Lahabrea, and she feared that she would not get anything unless she confronting him head on. She was not afraid of the dark.

After hearing about Claire’s assurances that she was sure where she was needed to go, Hihibaru sighed and shook his head. Almost in grudging admiration he went on to explain, “The Ala Mhigan bandit you had a run-in with is somehow connected to your masked man of mystery, yes? Well, it stands to reason that if you want to pick up the trail again, you should head toward Little Ala Mhigo, over in southern Thanalan.”

Southern Thanalan… she had never had the chance to venture out that far either and she could feel her curiosity growing at the thought of what else was out there. Other than the fact that it was home to a large group of Amalaj’aa, and that there was a small settlement of refugees who live in a series of caves that were called Little Ala Mhigo.

“Just so you know what to expect, the settlement is the favored destination for those refugees who couldn’t…well, adapt to life in Ul’dah,” Hihibaru warned her, “The hearts of the denizens are said to be as barren as the wasteland they live in. And for all intents and purposes, it’s a lawless place. Be prepared for a none-so-warm welcome.”

So she was heading off into a dangerous new area, with people who were more likely to want to skin her alive than ever help her out, all in pursuit of a man who—for all she knew—could set another monster upon her.

How can a girl possibly refuse such an offer?

She nodded, knowing that every step she made from now on was going to be dangerous, but that was what sounded like so much fun to her.

“How can a girl possibly refuse such an offer?” Claire promised and she could see the gratitude in his eyes at that.

“I’ll be sure to do that,” Claire promised and she could see the gratitude in his eyes at that.

“You have my thanks,” Hihibaru shifted, giving her a low bow. “I suppose this is it, then! I had hoped that you would linger here a while — cull some fiends, spend some coin, what have you — but something tells me you’re destined for greater things. Wherever it is you end up, I wish you the best!”
She laughed and waved him off—after making sure to buy a few pieces of dried meat for the road from him. So by the time she left, he was waving her off with both hands and looking truly cheerful this time. At least compared to his overused grin when she first saw him.

She called over her Chocobo once more and mounted him as she speeded off towards the southern tip, where her map showed her a small path through the canyon that would take her to the right path. The sun was up and high as she hurried along, with her wiping some sweat from her brow and curse herself for wearing heavy metal armor in a land like this. By the time that she made it to Southern Thanalan however, she had made it through high noon and the sun was beginning it’s decent through the sky.

Still, she was dying out in this heat and urged her Chocobo to go a little faster. She was sure that he must be also be hot; what with all those thick feathers on him… they could both use a rest out of the sun. They paused near a series of plateau where there was some shade and she gratefully slipped off her armor before pulling on her light-weight leathers. She ran her hands over the claws that she crafted before and tucked them at her side before taking a long sip of water from her pouch. Once she felt better, she offered some water to her new friend, who Kwehed gratefully.

After promising him more greens when they arrived, they set off again, continuing upon the pathway south until she could make out a series of plateaus directly ahead of them. She frowned a little in confusion before pulling out her map and looking over it again.

No… it was clearly marked as Little Ala Mhigo…?

So, feeling that she was missing something, she continued on for a time before they reached the more shaded areas of the plateau and began to look around. At first glance, it was just rock walls… at least until she spotted the wooden planks that had been set out as steps… and led to an iron gate. She dismounted, leading her bird in by his lead as they stepped through the gates and to a small oasis in the middle of a clearing that was free of stones and had the hot sun blazing down through several trees.

A giant aetheryte was spinning continuously in the middle of the pool as there were people scattered about them. As soon as they saw her, however, they seemed to stop and stare… as if they had never seen anyone like her before. Claire looked about, not liking the mixture of surprise and… even anger that weregazing back at her. She stood there for a moment, but since no one was telling her to get lost, she approached the aetheryte and attuned to it so that she need not worry about taking the long way around again.

She left her companion in the care of the Chocobo Keep before she hurried on through a series of tunnels and makeshift tents in the dark caves to find someone who could help her. She eventually came across a young-looking Lalafell, dressed in white, standing in front of a small tent as she seemed to be looking over a few scrolls.

Deciding to take a chance, she introduced herself and asked her for her name. If nothing else, the Lalafell certainly looked friendlier than most of the others who were continuing to give her nasty looks.

“Why, yes, Hihibaru’s my father…” the girl replied, startled that she would ask that. When Claire passed on her father's message, she couldn’t have sounded more amazed.

“He said what?” Hihira gasped and Claire arched an eyebrow, wondering why she would seem so surprised that a father would wish his daughter well? Hihira didn’t elaborate as she said, “I wish I could be a better daughter to him. It’s just that—” But she shook her head, not going into details as she shook her head and changed the subject, “Oh, I’m sorry…I shouldn’t bother you with family
Claire smiled as she explained her mission to track down this mysterious masked man. She spent several days with her father at Highbridge as she hunted down for information. Eventually, her search led her here, and she asked if she knew anything about anything strange happening in these parts.

“A masked man?” Hihihira repeated as she thought it all over, and from the tone, Claire’s spirits sank “I’m afraid the description doesn’t ring any bells, but one of the others here may have seen something. I would recommend you first speak with Gundobald, the leader of the settlement. I must warn you, though, he isn’t exactly… accommodating to outsiders.”

She then turned to point to a tall, broad-shouldered man with a thick white mustache, standing ready at another tent. He certainly didn’t look like a man who was in a talkative mood. Still, nothing was ever gained by standing around, and she approached.

“Excuse me?” she said politely as the man turned his sharp gaze towards her. Seeing how he towered over her, he reminded her a giant grizzly bear, ready to fight if given half the chance.

“Who are you?” he demanded before she even paused in step. “State your business, and be quick about it.”

Knowing that everything she said could make or break her chances to be allowed to stay, she humbly began to explain she was on the hunt for a suspicious masked man and it led her here.

However, she could see that her words were not swaying him. Instead, Gundobald just glared down at her, as stubborn as a brick wall as he asked unemotionally, as if he honestly could not care less what was being said, “Looking for a masked villain, you say? And why should we help you, pray? We struggle enough without having to answer the whim of every outsider.” He shook his head firmly as he pointed towards the exit and finished, “You are not welcome here. Begone.”

And she could not get another word out of him. In fact, she feared that she was just making it worse the longer she stood there and backed away to avoid the talk turning into a fight. But what was she supposed to do now?

Though it was slight, she could have sworn she saw a flicker of recognition in Gundobald’s eyes when she mentioned the masked man. He knew something, she was almost sure of it. But how could she get him to open up to her?

She looked around, noticing that the people were still glaring at her, but the closer she looked, she could see that many of them also had blank looks in their eyes… a look of exhausted defeat. Her heart went out to them, so she figured that, perhaps if she helped out… mayhaps…?

So, once again, she found herself performing small tasks around Little Ala Mhigo. While they weren’t much, she was trying to do her best to help make the people’s lives a little easier. Whether it meant hunting down food, or slaying pests that were bothering them, she was willing to do just about anything. Little by little, the people’s attitudes changed about her. While none of them were smiling and waving as she moved passed them, they were allowing her to go through with no words of complaint.

But that didn’t seem to be nearly enough for Gundobald… who watched her every move like a hawk, just looking for an excuse to have her kicked out. It wasn’t until she was called over by a man near the aetheryte crystal did she finally have some luck. The man waved politely when she came and gave her a kind smile as he introduced himself, “I’m Gisilbehrt, head of security here at
Little Ala Mhigo. I heard tell you had business with Gundobald. Knowing the bristly old bear, I don’t doubt he told you to bugger off.”

Claire blushed a little as she nodded, asking if there was something she did that could have upset him.

Gisilbehrt shook his head reassuringly as he informed her, “Owing to their hardships, the refugees don’t trust anyone but themselves. Not even my men and I can get so much as a word of thanks out of them despite watching the place day and night. But thanks or no, I try to help my fellow man when I can, and you seem a decent sort. If you tell me what’s brought you here, might be as I can lend you a hand.”

Grateful to have someone here willing to listen, she quickly explained her reason for being here, hoping that he could give her something to go by. Of course, by the time she finished, he was frowning thoughtfully at that before he shook his head.

“…On the trail of a masked villain, you say?” he asked as he thought back, “Hmmm, can’t say that sounds familiar, but I have men on lookout for Amal’ja to the south of here. If there’s been any suspicious activity, they are like to have seen it.”

He paused a little longer before a slight grin came to his face as he added, “You know… I had a mind to take them each a cup of sweet Thanalan tea so as to life their spirits. If you were to run this little errand in my stead, they’d be all the more willing to tell you what they know.”

“I would be happy to do so,” she promised him as he chuckled and went to a small container that was being kept cool in the shallow water and pulled it out. He filled three separate bottles before marking the locations on her map to where she could find them.

They weren’t too far out of her way, and they were more than happy to answer her questions, thankful for the cool tea to kept thirst away. Most of them were unable to give her any real information… at least until she reached the third guard, who gave her a surprising bit of news. Apparently he had seen a man fitting her description speaking to some Ala Mhigan youths when he was on patrol the other night.

So, she finally had confirmation that he was around these parts. Sadly, that also meant that she would have to find some way to get the people of Ala Mhigo to cooperate with her if she was to get anywhere. With no choice, she returned to Gisilbehrt and explained her predicament to him.

“…That doesn’t sound like much to go by,” he agreed slowly, “If you’re to get any further in your investigation, seems to me you’ll need the cooperation of the Ala Mhigans. For this, you’ll need to win their trust, and that won’t be an easy task.”

“I could tell,” Claire answered, “But how do I do that?”

Normally, all she had to do was help out where she could and that was normally enough to earn the people’s trust enough that they would help. However, the people here couldn’t seem to care less if she helped or not. All she knew was that if she didn’t think of something else soon she wasn’t going to get anywhere.

“So you’re determined to press on with your investigation?” he asked, looking impressed when he saw her nod. “Then I have some advice to offer. As I said before, you won’t get far without the Ala Mhigans’ trust. And the best way to win that trust is to get a compatriot of theirs — someone they respect — to vouch for you. Coin does the talking in Ul’dah, but the Ala Mhigans are bound by something far stronger, if not as tangible: a common purpose. That purpose is, of course, the
liberation of their home from the Garleans. Gundobald belongs to the Ala Mhigan Resistance, so your best bet would be someone who’s part of the same crew. If you know any well-connected people, you might want to start by asking them.”

The Ala Mhigan Resistance was an organization she had heard of before, but knew no one who could be a part of it. But as soon as he mentioned ‘well-connected’ people, she knew what she had to do. The Scions had connections a little bit everywhere. So if there was anyone who could help her get in contact with the Resistance, perhaps that would be enough to earn Gundobald’s trust. She had a feeling that if she could earn Gundobald’s cooperation, then she would be getting somewhere.

She hurried back to Vesper Bay as soon as she could, but by the time that she arrived, night had already come and stars were twinkling above her before disappearing behind clouds. It looked like it might rain soon in this dry land and she was glad to have found some cover before it came. When she entered the Waking Sands, many people waved to her cheerfully, which couldn’t have been more different than how she was treated in Little Ala Mhigo.

After stepping into the solar, Minfilia looked up from some paperwork, and beamed when she saw who it was.

“Ah, welcome back, Claire!” she said as Claire closed the doors behind her, “How fares the investigation?”

“I fear I hit a dead end,” she admitted as she stepped up to the desk and Minfilia stood up to greet her. “I managed to track one whom I believe to be Lahabrea to Little Ala Mhigo. However… the people there are less than willing to speak with me on the matter. Finding information is not easy.”

She then gave a quick summary of what she found out. She felt a little guilty, as if she was letting everyone down with her lack of information. Minfilia, however, didn’t look disappointed or even surprised when she heard of the plight of the people in Little Ala Mhigo.

“I see… Given all that they have suffered, it is of little wonder the Ala Mhigan refugees have lost faith in their fellow man,” she sighed, “They have had their homeland taken from them, and for the past two decades have had to see it remain in the enemy’s clutches. To compound matters, none of the three city-states have the means to take in all those who were displaced. As a result, a great many Ala Mhigans now live on the margins of society, suffering poverty and discrimination.”

So that was it. No wonder the people gave her such cold looks—as if they were blaming her for their situation.

Minfilia sighed once more before adding, “Would that more could be done to ease their hardships. I fear that nothing short of reclaiming their homeland would be a lasting solution.”

Would that even be possible? She doubted that the Garleans would be willing to let go of their prize after nearly twenty years of ruling it. She suspected nothing short of a full scale invasion would be enough to loosen their grip on the land.

“But let us deal with one problem at a time,” Minfilia said decisively, determined to continue the discussion towards finding Lahabrea. “Returning to the matter of your investigation, it just so happens that there is an Ala Mhigan native among the Scions. I believe you must have spoken to him before – his name is Haribehrt.”

Claire blinked at that as she thought back. Right, there were many members of the Scions here… but she honestly could not recall them all by name. But now that she mentioned it, there was a
chance she spoke to this Haribehrt before… at least, she spoke with a man who did look a great deal like the Highlanders she saw back at Little Ala Mhigo.

“Yes, he joined our cause in the hopes that he might find a way to liberate his homeland,” Minfilia encouraged her, “While he spares no effort towards that endeavor, I have no doubt that he would be glad to assist you. If I recall correctly, Haribehrt is currently between missions. Try looking for him in the storage area.”

So, her luck was continuing to hold. She only hoped it would be enough to get her to the answers she needed. She left the solar and headed off into the storage area, where there were all manner of crates full of supplies set up everywhere. It looked to her like a cross between a storage area and a small pub… for there were a handful of tables and chairs set up, as well as doubling as a break room where most of the Scions seemed to spend their time off so that they could speak with their comrades. She was greeted by several when they entered, including Yda, Papalymo, and Noraxia—who waved happily and asking how she was doing.

She just smiled back before she gazed about to find the young Highlander leaning back in his seat, looking comfortable. Now she remembered him… she had spoken with him a few times before, and now that she thought of it, she believed that he may have mentioned Ala Mhigo once or twice to her.

“If it isn’t Claire Faye, the Scions’ rising star!” he laughed as she approached. “Is there aught I can do for you?”

Now starting to grow a little tired trying to explain her situation to everyone, she informed him of her problem, and he looked genuinely impressed. As if he couldn’t imagine a more ambitious goal than to earn his people’s aid.

“You wish to earn the trust of the people of Little Ala Mhigo!” he asked, “That is a daunting task, my friend, even for our own countrymen. I would like nothing more than to help, but I’m afraid my name no longer carries weight with that lot. I used to be a member of the Ala Mhigan Resistance, you see, but I left in favor of joining the Scions. Though my allegiance may have shifted, my purpose remains ever the same — the liberation of Ala Mhigo. Yet whatever my reasons were, I abandoned my comrades, and they’ll have nothing to do with me.”

Well, she could not deny that she was disappointed in that. Now what was she supposed to do?

But he seemed to have an answer for that and he quickly reassured her, “Don’t look so down. While I may have no more friends in the Resistance, I know someone who does. Her name is Albreida, and she is a resident of Quarrymill. Say my name when you meet her, and she won’t lead you astray.”

Quarrymill? Oh, that was in the South Shroud! She knew that it was a small settlement that was a little to the west of the Druthers.

She thanked him, though it would be a lie if she was not frustrated at this. This investigation was taking her all across Eorzea… she could only hope that she wouldn’t have to go any further than the Shroud after this.

Forgetting the lateness of the hour, she chose to teleport, taking herself all the way to the Hawthorne Hut in the East Shroud, before she hit the ground running. She knew the paths well enough that she would be able to find them even in the dark, and so she headed south, through the thick trees, before she came to the small village that was nestled above a small creek.
But with how late it was, she doubted very much that she would receive aid at this time and chose to hunker down between some giant roots. It would be sure to keep any rain out, as well as offer protection from any stray creature that came sniffing about; and after laying out upon a small sleeping roll, she was asleep in moments.

When she woke the next day, it was to a sunbeam to her eyes and she hit her head upon the roots as she sat up—trying to remember how she got there. Once the bump on her head brought everything back, she packed up her bedroll and proceeded down to the settlement to see what she could learn here.

In all honesty, she was almost expecting them to send her to another distant corner of Eorzea on a wild dodo chase. Perhaps trying to get her to perform some strange task or collect something for them… or even them denying their help at all.

What she was not expect was for the strong-willed woman named Albreda eyes to flash when she explained her situation and the mention of Hariberht’s name.

“That worthless whoreson… He abandons his comrades — his woman — and now he has the gall to ask *me* for a favor!?” she demanded in outrage, actually looking up at the sky and shaking her hands, as if itching to place them around Hariberht’s throat. Note to self: tell Hariberht not to step foot into Quarrymill if he values his life.

Albreda looked ready to continue to rant and rave for the rest of the day. Clare did not dare say anything as the woman seemed to remember where she was and took several deep breaths to calm herself.

“Simply incredible…” she finally said, brushing her hand through her hair. “I just… I mean…”

She finally looked back to Claire and sighed as she confessed, “Ugh, I realize Haribehrt was only doing what he felt was right. He’s a good man. And if he trusts you, then that’s all I need to know.” She pointed over Claire’s shoulder to a group of men standing around a short distance away at the edge of the small creek and instructed, “You see that bloke there? That’s Meffrid, a captain of the Resistance. I hope he can give you what you need.”

“Thank you, Albreda,” Claire replied, carefully backing away as Albreda continued muttering what she really thought of her ex. Clare left her to it, not the least bit eager to give Albreda a chance to vent her frustration upon her.

Meffrid, it turned out, was also someone she was not expecting. As a captain of one of the branches of the Ala Mhigan Resistance, he and his men had managed to escape a battle… but one of their members was still badly wounded. Meffrid wasn’t able to even hear her request as he begged someone, anyone, who would help treat their friend. Claire’s heart ached at the sound of his heartfelt pleas and found herself unable to turn her back on helping him. After she spoke with the people on Meffrid’s behalf, only to find that they felt for the Ala Mhigans, they did not wish to risk the wrath of the Elementals.

Running of out options, she was sent out to collect some antelope horns and brought them to Druthers where she met up with a familiar barkeeper, who was more than happy to see her again. After explaining what she was doing, it turned out that he had some of the medicine on hand and gladly handed it to her to help out the soldier.

After returning to Quarrymill with the medicine, she was given a shock with the soldier had slipped away, believing that he was holding everyone back. She joined the search and tracked him down before he was killed by several Goblins… where he was then hauled back to Quarrymill
where they were able to have him treated.

No sooner did they give him the medicine did his fever break and she sighed in relief, glad to see that he would make a full recover so long as he kept taking the medicine. Knowing that he was on his way to recovery, she met with Meffrid once more, who was incredibly grateful for all that she had done to help.

“No sooner did they give him the medicine did his fever break and she sighed in relief, glad to see that he would make a full recover so long as he kept taking the medicine. Knowing that he was on his way to recovery, she met with Meffrid once more, who was incredibly grateful for all that she had done to help.

“Now that things are relatively settled, friend,” he began, “I seem to recall that you wanted something of me.”

In light of all that happened, she had almost forgotten the reason she came out here to begin with and awkwardly laughed in embarrassment.

He chuckled as she bowed and told her sincerely, “You’ve proven a true friend to my people. Ask of me anything, and it’s yours, so long as it’s mine to give.”

“That is kind of you,” Claire reassured him, feeling a light blush across her cheeks as she asked for his aid in helping earn the cooperation of the people of Little Ala Mhigo for her investigation.

“The cooperation of the people of Little Ala Mhigo? That’s all? Well, far be it from me to question your desires, of course…” Meffried said in surprise, shaking his head as if wondering why anyone would ever ask for such a reward. “Very well, I will provide you with a letter to show to Gundobald. The old bear was my mentor when I first joined the Resistance. He’s intimidating to those who don’t know him, but he takes care of his own. I’ve no doubt that he will do all in his power to aid you.”

From the Gundobald that she saw before, she doubted that a letter would be enough to convince him. Still, she thanked him for the help as he took his time in writing out a long letter.

“Here we are,” he said at last, as he rolled it up into a tight scroll and tied it with some twine. “I took the time to also mention everyone else who survived the last battle. I hope that would raise the spirits of those in Little Ala Mhigo to know that we few survived. As well as your part in helping us. Just show this to Gundobald and he should be able to help you out.”

She hoped he was right. She nodded to show she understood before she headed back out. She teleported straight back to Little Ala Mhigo, her hopes not high at all. Nor was she comfortable with the idea of speak to Gundobald again in case he really did throw her out by the scruff of her neck this time.

Like she thought, he was glaring when he saw her once again and was now cracking his knuckles together, as if readying himself for a fight.

“Why have you returned?” he demanded coldly, “You are not welcome here; I thought I made that clear.”

Rather than waste time talking, she held out the letter, mentioning she was asked to deliver it to him. He arched an eyebrow as he snatched it away and unrolled it. But as she watched his eyes scan over it, she watched as they soon widened with amazement and even joy… so by the time he finished, he looked almost completely different than how he was a moment ago. There was a new softness to his face that she almost didn’t recognize him as the same cold man she had spoken too before.

“You…you spoke with Meffrid?” he asked, afraid to believe it, “It has been so long since I last heard from him, I had feared him dead… Twelve be praised…” He sighed as memories were
clearly playing over in his mind of a young Meffrid as he looked to her with a new kind of respect in his face. “Whoever you are, Meffrid sees you as a friend, and any friend of Meffrid is a friend of mine. I know of this masked stranger you seek, and will tell you what I can.”

Exhausted relief spread through her body at that and she smiled once more, bowing her head thankful to finally have some answers. Finally, she was able to continue searching for Lahabrea, and maybe track him down to get those answers.

She thanked Gundobald for agreeing to assist her as she quickly explained what was going on and what little she knew of the masked man who was in this area. When she finished, she could see how Gundobald’s brow furrowed in concern.

“An outsider resembling your masked stranger has reportedly been appearing near Little Ala Mhigo of late,” he confessed, “What’s more, it seems that some of our young bloods are meeting him in secret.”

Well, that couldn’t be good for either of them.

“No doubt you’ll want to question them about their trysts, but they are not like to yield the information readily to an outsider,” he instructed, “If you tell them I sent you, though, they may well feel obliged to talk.”

So that was what she did. Tracking down the youths in this area were easy enough… but even with his name, it was not easy trying to get them to talk to her. Which, in her experience, usually was a sign of a guilty party. She suspected that these guys knew that whatever they were planning with this masked man, could not be good.

All but for one girl, who began ranting that she warned the others that it was a terrible idea and they should stop before it was too late. But once she let that slip out, she shut her mouth and refused to say another word on the subject.

So she returned to Gundobald and informed him of the little she did learn.

After listening intently for the last few minutes, he sighed, “So, you have indeed confirmed my suspicions about a masked man… That is most troubling. Whatever the young ones are scheming, it can lead to no good end. There’s an anger inside them — I can see it in their eyes. I ought to know, for it once burned within me as well.”

Claire could see that there was something weighing heavily upon Gundobald’s mind, and after waiting for a brief moment, he sighed once more and explained, as if unable to keep this secret inside any longer, “Two decades ago, this anger drove my brothers and I to rise against the despot who ruled Ala Mhigo. Naught would do but we to depose him and usher in a revolution. Well, we got our revolution, all right… but it cost us our freedom. Blinded by our hate, we didn’t realize that we had been dancing to the Empire’s tune. By the time we did, it was too late. Ala Mhigo had fallen.”

Ah, so that was what happened. She had heard of stories of what happened to Ala Mhigo while here in this small settlement. Of this ‘mad king’ who all but drove them to ruin. But now did she find out that by overthrowing him was what gave the Empire their opening to invade. Which made perfect sense… why not kick someone down when they are at their lowest?

Gundobald scowled and shook his head frantically, as if thinking that he could dispel the memories if he did it hard enough.
“There are times when a man must be patient,” he explained, “Now is such a time, though the young ones know this not. Unless we intervene, they are like to commit great folly. If you learn aught of their plans, I would thank you to bring word to me.”

“I would be glad to do so,” she said before privately thinking to herself, ‘If I knew where to go from here.’ There was really not much more she could do but keep an eye on those youths from before. Gundobald gave her permission to stay for as long as she desired… and she hoped that time spent here would give her an opening to find some sort of clue.

She wasn’t sure what it was, but the idea of this Lahabrea trying to tempt these young warriors into doing… whatever it was that they were planning, could not end well.

But as she walked away, she heard someone quietly call her over.

“Hey, adventurer.”

She paused and looked up to see another of the younger Ala Mhigan men trying to wave her over. As she approached, he asked, “You done talking with the old bear?”

“For now,” she said slowly, not liking the shifty look in his eye.

“I’ve got a message for you from Wilred,” the man explained, “Lad’s something of a leader among the young ones here. He’s impressed that you’ve won over Gundobald, and wants a word with you. Says he’ll be waiting over at the craggy area north of here.”

She believed that she may know this Wilred… one of the youths she spoke too earlier. Still, this sounded like a very dumb idea to her all of a sudden… all of her instincts were screaming at her that this was a trap and not to go. Still, if there was even the slightest chance she could get some intel, she would guess that Wilred was the one to speak too.

So she went outside, heading directly north and around the plateau as she headed to the meeting place. Soon enough, she spotted the rather jumpy young man standing there in the shade and looking around.

As soon as he spotted her, he waved her over, and she felt her hands brush against the claws at her side, ready to punch her way out.

“Thanks for coming, friend,” he began, “Tis no ordinary outsider who can gain the trust of the old bear. That’s why I wanted to meet you, to discuss something in private.” Now that they were alone, he saw no further need to play nice as he growled out, his false smile wiped of his face, “Tell me… why are you snooping about? Did the Empire send you? Or someone else?”

She arched an eyebrow as she asked, “Why do you ask?”

It was clear to her that he wasn’t interested in hearing her explanation, and she doubted that he would believe her anyway.

“Coeurl got your tongue?” he asked before he smirked and finished, “No matter. Whoever it is you work for, your meddling ends here. Get her!”

At his cry, a couple other youths from Little Ala Mhigo leapt out and went charging at them. Claire was glad that she chose to fight with her fists for now; out of respect for Gundobald, she had no desire to kill them. But if they were going to fight her, she was sure as hell wasn’t going to let them go without a few well deserved bruises.
They had a lot of muscle behind their punches, but no real experience, that much was clear to her when she knocked out a couple teeth from the first guy. Faster than blinking, both were on the ground, completely dazed and winded from her fury of punches and kicks. She then turned her eyes sharply to Wilred, who took a few steps back.

From behind the crags leaped two other youths, fists flying. Not wanting to hurt them, she didn’t draw her bow – thankful her uncle had taught her a thing or two of pugilism. As strong as they were, she was faster, and they were both on the ground groaning in little time. She then turned towards Wilred, fists still raised, glaring expectantly.

“Y-You’re stronger than you look…” he admitted, attempting to sound brave, but there was still a slight squeak in his voice. Perhaps he noticed this for he suddenly barked, “This changes nothing! Threaten us, beat us bloody all you like… but nothing short of death can make us give up our fight! We’re going to obtain the power to bring down the Empire, and with it we’ll reclaim our homeland!”

Wait, what was that? She blinked, taken aback by his declaration as he turned and ran off, with the two other boys limping to their feet and followed after him. Claire let them go as dread began to settle around her heart once again. What did he mean by that? Could it just be that he was just trying to act tough in front of her? That seemed most likely, but the way he spoke… as if he truly believed in everything he just said.

The power to bring down the Empire? Just what kind of power were they talking about? Continuing to feel that sense of unease, she decided that her best course of action was to return to Gundobald and tell him what Wilred just said.

The words were barely out of her mouth when she saw Gundobald pale when she did return to the dark of the caves.

“Attacked by Wilred and his cronies!?” he repeated, as if wondering is his hearing was off today. “That they would go to such lengths for the sake of this plan of theirs… Left to their own devices, the young fools are like to harm others, if not themselves. We must uncover their agenda and put an end to this madness.”

She fully agreed with this plan, however how were they to go about it? Wilred and the others did not seem to be at all interested in revealing their plans to anyone, much less to her. And then there was the matter of his threat…?

“Wilred mentioned obtaining the power to bring down the Empire. Of what power could he be speaking…?” Gundobald questioned with a frown, unknowingly speaking what she was thinking of earlier.

Before they could continue bouncing ideas off each other, another voice spoke up, a whimper of pain and broken voice, “Gun…Gundobald… I-I…”

They both looked to see a battered young woman limping over to them, blood dripping down the side of her face as she looked as if she was trying to hold back her tears. At the sight of her, Gundobald dropped everything else they were doing as he cried, “Bertliana!? Gods preserve! What happened!”

She staggered over as she whimpered out in shame, “I was out foraging…when the Corpse Brigade came… They took me to their hideout…and they… they…” Claire did not wish to know what those brigades did to her… though just by looking at the girl’s beaten face, she did not need to guess. As the girl bravely tried to tell them, she was unable to stop the tears as she broke down,
crying out, “The whole while, they laughed at me... They said that I suffer... because I cling on to hope... Is it so wrong to dream of home?! Is it wrong to call ourselves Ala Mhigans?!”

But Gundobald shook his head as he came closer, holding the girl close and rubbed her back in a calming way as he told her kindly, like how a father would comfort a child who awoke from a terrible nightmare, “Do not heed such poisonous notions, child. Our dreams are what sustain us. Be strong — I swear to you, those villains will answer for their crimes in due time. But tell me... does anyone else know of this?”

Bertliana pulled away as she confessed, “Wilred... He saw me outside... He was so angry...”

Which was a warning sign if ever there was one. Gundobald frowned before turning back to Claire and told her, “I must tend to Bertliana. In the meantime, I need you to find out what the young ones make of this. I fear that they may do something rash.”

Claire nodded, already seeing Wilred unable to let this injustice go and could very easily putting their plan into motion ahead of schedule. To hurry and reclaim their homeland for his people, or at the least, to punish those who hurt Bertliana as practice.

She ran out, to track them down... only to realize that they were already on their way out. All of them spoke of the ‘lizards’ and of ‘crystals’ for their plan... and when she discovered a map of Zan’ak—the land where the Amalj’aa had claimed as their own, with the knife sticking through it, she suddenly was able to put the pieces together. With a groan, she returned to Gundobald, who had just finished having the girl treated and had given her a bed with a warm blanket to cover her, looked up in surprise to see how she tore her way back to him.

When she told them of what the others said, saw the fury in their eyes, and what she found, she saw how his eyes widened in shock.

“Gone? The whole lot of them? Then it is as I feared — they mean to take matters into their own hands,” he said, “But what exactly is it that they mean to do?”

When she showed him the map and the place where the knife had marked it, she could see how Gundobald was able to put the pieces all together.

“A hunting knife...and a map of Zan’ak?” he questioned, “…You said Wilred spoke of crystals, did you not? But they couldn’t possibly mean to — By the gods, this is rank madness…”

She nodded grimly. It made sense to her... why they were meeting in secret to Wilred’s threat... though her understanding of primals was still minimal at best... she knew enough to know that they would soon have everything they needed for a summoning... assuming that they weren’t killed by the Amalj’aa first. Which was where she was certain that was where they were heading too right now.

Gundobald looked ready to scream out in frustration and panic once it all settled in.

“The young fools are untrained and unblooded, all,” he said, “They have no notion of how dangerous the Amalj’aa are. They’ll be butchered before they get within a hundred yalms of the crystals. They are headed east. If we hurry, we may yet find them before it’s too late.”

Gundobald paused only to gather those nearest who were able to fight and they all bolted after him. The others had gotten a head start, but Gundobald knew a shorter way to get to Zan’ak. Claire was worried about actually having to enter those lands... having never been there, but aware that the Amalj’aa elites were waiting for them. She sure didn’t want to be around those guys right now.
But it turns out they didn’t need to go that far, for by the time they reached the edge of a canyon to
where a rickety bridge was waiting for them, they found Wilred there, with two others who were
both beaten and terrified as they tried to catch their breath.

“Wilred…” Gundobald said, unable to keep a hint of relief out of his voice even though it was
mixed in with horror and anger as they ran ahead to meet him. But after a quick look around, it was
clear that these three were the only ones who made it out and he asked, with a mournful tone, “Did
no others survive?”

Wilred looked up, his eyes red from tears as he gasped out halfway between a scream and cry,
“This is all wrong… Getting the crystals was supposed to be the start… We were going to reclaim
our homeland… We were… We…”

“Pull yourself together, lad!” Gundobald barked, actually causing Wilred to jump back, as if
thinking he was about to get smacked away.

Yet it was enough to cause Wilred to blurt out what was truly going on.

“W-We were going to make an offering of crystals to Rhalgr — to summon Him, j-just like the
masked man taught us!” he cried out, “We plotted to sneak into Zan’ak and make off with the
lizardman’s cache, b-but they caught us, and… and… So many dead…” Unable to go on, he all but
fell to his knees as he gasped, “Gods forgive me…”

Claire closed her eyes as horror filled her very soul. If only she figured it all out sooner? She could
have prevented this from happening. Lahabrea had tricked them into thinking that if they summon
their god, then they could reclaim Ala Mhigo for their people. While she wasn’t sure if it was truly
possible to summon one of the Twelve here, she didn’t want to find out.

They broke into the Amalj’aa stores of crystals—where she suspected that the crystals would be
low at this point after the last summoning of Ifrit—and tried to steal them all in order to summon
Rhalgr. But they underestimated how strong the Amalj’aa were and that was what led to this.

Before anyone could speak further, a voice roared out from the bridge. “Heathens! You shall pay
for your crimes with your souls!” She jerked up, a recoil went down her spine at the voice, as she
saw several of the large lizardmen running across the bridge towards them, their scaled faces all
filled with fury. And there were no shortage of them either—leaving Claire to wonder how the
bridge could possibly support them all on their way here.

But Gundobald already stepped forward, pulling his lance off his back as he declared, “I regret our
young ones’ transgressions, but a soul is too high a price for youthful folly. For all their failings,
they are the hope of the Ala Mhigan people. This hope I will guard with my life!”

She knew she liked this guy.

She raised up her own claws as she began to move back and forth on her feet, ready to speed
around these lumbering brutes. And at that, the Amalj’aa were upon them, with Claire and
Gundobald doing their best to protect Wilred and the survivors behind them. At the sight of her, the
Amalj’aa let out roars of rage, calling out how she carried with her the smell of brimstone with her.
Really? She still smelled like smoke and ash after all this time? For that remark, she ended up
leaping up and breaking that Amalj’aa’s jaw…

And it only make things harder when she saw several people also running in… with those dead
eyes and blank expressions… and her heart constricted painfully at the sight. There was nothing
else she could do for those people but put them out of their misery…
The good thing was that while the battle was harsh, it was also quick. Once it was clear who they were fighting, one of the Amalj’aa, who was halfway across the bridge, turned back and began to warn his brothers to protect their stores of crystals from Ifrit’s Bane. It was enough to prevent more reinforcements from coming, and letting them focus on those who came… after awhile, they were steadily making progress… bringing the Amalj’aa down without worrying about more taking their place.

Finally, after the last of them fell with a loud thud… they were all panting for air… some injured, but none of them having died. With a sigh of relief, Gundobald turned back to Claire, who was rubbing her sore knuckles, and clapped her on the shoulder as he praised, “Your skill at arms is impressive, adventurer. Our wayward youths could learn much from a woman like you.”

She just smiled, feeling a touch of pink in her cheeks as he grinned back, looking tired and bruised, but still thankful that they managed to make it out of that mess alive. His expression hardened a little, however, when he turned to the others and ordered, “The battle is won, but it would be unwise to linger here. Let us return to Little Ala Mhigo.”

“W-Wait!” Wilred cried suddenly, “We’ve come all this way — we have to get the crystals! They’re right there, ripe for the picking!”

That was certainly enough for Gundobald to give Wilred a sharp slap to the face and barked at him if he had seen what became of those poor souls that they fought and asked if he wished to suffer the same fate.

“Wh-What!?” Wilred yelped, raising a hand to his red cheek, now looking more lost than ever before. “N-No one said anything about — The masked man told us we could defeat the Empire if we summoned Rhalgr! He swore—”

“Enough!” Gundobald snapped. “I will hear the rest of this sorry tale back in Little Ala Mhigo.” He paused, as he glanced back at Claire, who was watching on, feeling sick to her stomach as he added, “I daresay Claire will wish to hear it as well.”

She most certainly would. If nothing else…?

She glanced down at the blood that was splattered across her fists… knowing that not all of it had come from the lizardmen… rather most of it came from…? She turned back to see the few dead who were lying there… their faces looking oddly peaceful even after death. She had made sure to hit them hard enough that it was as painless as it was quick…

Still that did not block out the guilt that was eating away at her as they headed back to Little Ala Mhigo.

She felt dirty just looking at her hands, despite knowing that there wasn’t anything else that she could have done. Those people… there was nothing else that could be done. She knew that. They all explained to her that once one was tempered, the kindest thing they could do was to put them out of their misery than force them to live like mindless servants like that. Yet…?

It wasn’t like she hadn’t killed before… she remembered the pirates back in Limsa for instance. But that was different… they were fully aware of what they were doing. They knew what they were doing was wrong… the dead beings in the Deepcroft? Well, they were already dead so that didn’t weigh upon her soul… sure, she felt sorrow and grief for those poor giants in the mines but they still had to be stopped… even if she felt rotten for doing the deed. But these people…? When she looked at those people, she did not find it hard to believe that, before the Amalj’aa snatched them, they were once ordinary people. They had family, friends, a home… hopes and dreams…
even something as simple as names.

People who were just trying to make it in this world and were so cruelly struck down.

Just what were the names of those she just brought down she wondered…?

She didn’t think she would ever find out.

She remained quiet even after they arrived at Little Ala Mhigo, where Gundobald took a deep breath before looking back to Wilred, who was looking at his feet.

“No more lives, Wilred,” he warned as he crossed his arms, “Tell us everything.”

And it was with a shaky sigh did Wilred nod and confess, “I was outside with the others when he appeared — the masked stranger. He told us about summoning Rhalgr, about using crystals, and then just…vanished. We never saw him again.”

Just one meeting caused this much damage?

Claire bit her lower lip as she thought that over, wondering just what it was that Lahabrea could have said to cause this much of an effect?

“I wanted so desperately to believe that we could raise ourselves from this squalor that I never stopped to question his motives,” Wilred tried to reason, before a gloomy hopelessness fell over him. “But I should have known — there’s no solution, nothing we can do to change our lot. Our people are doomed to live and die like beasts…”

Gundobald frowned at him before putting a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“Listen to me, Wilred,” he said slowly and seriously so that the boy could not hope to misunderstand his words, “Our home may be lost to us, but it takes more than stones and mortar to define who we are. No matter where we may be, Ala Mhigo lives on within us all. It is for you to decide what to make of this legacy. But whatever you chose to do with your life, never forget that you owe it to this adventurer—” he indicated Claire, who was still watching silently, and finished, “An outsider.”

“I…I won’t.” Wilred replied quietly. “I promise.” He turned to Claire, guilt and sadness written there as he mumbled, “Thank you for saving me. And…sorry I tried to kill you.”

Seeing that look on his face… realizing just how guilty he felt about everything, she could no longer find it in her to be angry with him. This was his mistake and he would have to learn to live with it. But there was no need for her to hold a grudge. She just nodded once, showing that she would not blame him for that, and she saw a flick of gratitude drift across his face before he walked off, his head low.

She and Gundobald watched on as he went off, perhaps to think more about where he needs to go from here. But Gundobald didn’t press the matter as he let him go. Instead, he turned back to Claire and said to her, “My thanks as well, friend. It gives us hope to know that there are kind souls such as you out there. Little Ala Mhigo may not have much in the way of comfort, but you will always be welcome here.”

“You are welcomed,” she said softly. “I’m glad that I could help. If nothing else, you can rest easy knowing that you should be safe from that masked man for the foreseeable future. I don’t think he will be coming back here.”
It was a small consolation, but it did ease some of the guilt inside her at the thought that she managed to save at least a few this day.

Gundobald nodded, sighing. “Would that we had more information to offer, but what Wilred told you is the extent of our knowledge of the masked stranger you seek. Left unchecked, that man will bring about great pain and suffering. I pray that you’ll find and put a swift end to the creature — for the sake of the young ones who died by his poisoned words.”

She nodded, promising she would do all she could to stop him. She thanked Gundobald one last time before she left Little Ala Mhigo, not sure how she should be feeling right now.

At this point in her investigation, she had hit another dead end. While she believed what she said in the thoughts that seeing that masked man around these parts again seemed unlikely, it left her with nowhere else to go.

If nothing else, however, she could inform Minfilia and the others what happened here and reassure them that Rhalgr wasn’t going to be making an appearance anytime soon.

She was exhausted by the time that she returned to the Waking Sands, thinking longingly of getting some sleep, not aware of how late it had become at this point. She was even wondering if anyone was still awake at this point by the time she entered the solar… to find that Minfilia was still awake, but was yawning loudly from her seat, looking ready to head off to bed.

At the sight of her, her entire face lit up, as if nothing could have pleased Minfilia more than seeing her returning back safe and in one piece.

“Oh, welcome back, Claire!” she said warmly. “I’ve been reliably informed the investigation took you to Quarrymill and Little Ala Mhigo. So tell me, where you able to learn aught of Lahabrea?”

Claire nodded, though while she could not confirm with certainty that it was Lahabrea behind it, she informed her of the masked man seen around Little Ala Mhigo and how he tried to trick some of the younger ones into summoning a god themselves.

She saw Minfilia’s eyes widened with horror before she reassured her, “You need not worry. The matter has been settled. I don’t think that they will resort to summoning the Destroyer anytime soon.”

While there was certainly relief at that, she still saw the heavy frown that Minfilia was wearing as she summed up, “Planted the knowledge of summoning in impressionable young minds…? Precisely the kind of deception the Ascians would employ… While much of the ills that ail the land can be attributed to the Calamity, some are being brought about by a malign will. We must needs delve deeper into this, while things remain quiet on the primal front…”

She was unable to finish her train of thought, however, for a big yawn broke free from her and both chuckled at that. Minfilia touched her shoulder and led her out of the room, promising that they would speak further of the investigation once they got some rest.

*Thancred*

Thancred’s headache didn’t leave him even after he woke up from his nap—if you could call it that—he was unable to do more than toss and turn as he tried to nurse his throbbing head. He had more than his fair share of nights where he had too much to drink and he awoke with a serious hangover. But here it was like he went straight to the hangover without the fun of getting there.

After a few hours, he finally gave up and went to the Quicksand in Ul’dah where he tried to take a
cold shower to try and soothe the pain. It was a relief on his aching body… but he suddenly found his entire body so heavy that all he wanted was to crawl back into bed and sleep through this pain.

But he had already spent half a day nursing himself, he couldn’t afford to waste any more time on this. He brushed his hair out of his face as he finished dressing and planned Minfilia on his linkpearl to reassure her that he was doing much better. In truth, he knew that he must look as terrible as he felt and the last thing he wanted was to upset Minfilia anymore than he already had.

He could handle it. He would have to. Still, with his head aching so badly, he did not think he could stand to even look at a tome right now and decided to head out to search through Thanalan for any other clues he could find on the Paragons. If nothing else, the fresh air could do him some good.

Now his head was starting to ring… oh, wait.

He reached up to his linkpearl again and waited.

“Thancred?” said a familiar voice.

“Ah, Papalymo,” Thancred said, forcing a cheerful tone to come out of his mouth to hide how miserable he truly felt. “I heard that you all made it back from the woods. Well done on your meeting with the Sylphs. How are you doing?”

“Well as can be expected,” Papalymo told him, but the seriousness in his voice caused Thancred to frown.

“Is there a problem, my friend?” he asked.

“Perhaps,” Papalymo said, “I don’t know for sure what it is about, but Y’shtola is requesting everyone’s presence back at the Waking Sands. Apparently, there has been a new development taking place in Limsa.”

Thancred felt as if the bottom of his stomach dropped at that.

“Please tell me that the Sahagin did not summon Leviathan again?” he pleaded.

“I cannot say for sure, just that your presence is requested,” Papalymo said. “All I know for sure is that it’s an urgent matter. If it’s not too much trouble...?”

“I’ll be there in less than an hour,” Thancred promised him as he fought a yawn. “Just let me take care of a few things and I’ll be there. There was something I wanted to show you all anyway. Thanks for letting me know.”

He hung up as he groaned at the thought of more work. He was so tired… he had no desire to go anywhere but back up to his soft bed and sleep his headache away. But no… there was no rest for the righteous, as Cid used to say.

So, after a few minutes to try and steady himself, he pushed himself off the wall he was leaning against and headed to the door… not even aware of how his hand was brushing against the dark crystal in his pocket.

*Claire*

It was early the next morning when Claire next opened her eyes and stretched out as she rolled out of bed. She felt a little better compared to last night, but it still took a few hours to force her body to
rest for the image of what she learned yesterday continued to play around in her head. She could not shake the thought of how one person was causing so much trouble just by going around and dropping suggestions to those who were desperate enough to accept it.

She had to stop Lahabrea before he tempted anyone else into a mistake that could cost them their lives. She greeted Minfilia when she entered the solar, finding her back at her desk and looking over some reports when she did enter.

“Ah, good afternoon, Claire!” Minfilia said brightly, “Some new information arrived this morning, courtesy of our friends the sylphs. An individual fitting Lahabrea’s description has been sighted in the North Shroud.”

Claire tilted her head at that, wondering just what he would be doing in the Shroud. Then again, it was in the Shroud where she first encountered him to begin with. Perhaps he was trying another tactic with the Sylphs or…?

“This sighting comes in the wake of a series of mysterious deaths in the selfsame area,” Minfilia said, her smile quickly fading at the thought of this dark development, “My instincts tell me that our man is involved. I would have you continue your investigation where you left off. Twelve willing, we will pick up Lahabrea’s trail once more.”

Though she was trying to keep a brave smile on, she could see that the idea of gruesome murders was disturbing her greatly.

“Noraxia can furnish you with the details,” she finished, “Pray speak with her, and take it from there. As always, be careful out there, Claire.”

Claire nodded, holding up a hand in farewell as she headed out the door, stopping only to head to the storage room, where she found their new Sylph friend cheerfully speaking to Yda and Papalymo. But when she spotted her approaching them, she let out a happy squeak and fluttered over to her.

“Friendly one Claire!” she greeted, “Did walking one Minfilia tell you the news these ones had?”

Claire forced a smile back as she nodded, questioning her about these murders as Noraxia cheer soon turned solemn.

“If friendly one Claire is to investigate sinister one, then heed well this one’s words,” she warned her, “This one is friends with a walking one in the Ashcrow Consortium. According to friendly one, a digging one named Medrod had an encounter with a scary masked one. This masked one is most certainly sinister one! Friendly one Claire should go and speak with digging one Medrod. Digging one is to be found at Fallgourd Float in the North Shroud.”

Claire wasn’t entirely sure she understood completely what she was talking about. But if she had to guess, she would say that this ‘digging one’ was a miner and that she could find him at Fallgourd Float in the North Shroud. So, it was with a fond farewell to them did she turn on her heel and headed out towards Gridania.

She had been to the North Shroud a few times, but she never ventured too far into that territory, having been warned before that a lot of Ixali tended to live in this area as well. If nothing else, this job was taking her a lot further out than she thought she would go right away. While she always planned to head out there herself one day, it was never this soon.

It was a bit of a rush, if truth be told.
By the time that she arrived at Fallgourd Float, it was the early afternoon and the slight mists had cleared up when the sun came out. After asking around, she found the ‘digging one’ Medrod at a tavern called the Bobbing Cork where he was shaking and drinking a large mug of ale as if it was water and his two friends watched with rather incredulous looks.

“Excuse me?” she asked as he jumped, shaking and trembling, as if her quiet voice was suddenly a shout.

“P-Please leave me be…” he muttered, refusing to look at her as the woman miner next to him shook her head and the tall Elezen looked as if he wasn’t sure it was a good time to laugh or not. “I’m not long for this world… I… I looked death in the face… ‘Tis only a matter of time before he comes for me, just like he came for that poor woman…”

And she couldn’t get another word out of him that didn’t involve him breaking down, as if he truly thought that he was going to drop dead at any moment. Just then, one of the people who was sitting with him, a young woman, rolled her eyes and patted him on the back as she looked to Claire.

“You wanted words with Medrod?” she then proceeded to ask, ignoring his mumbling cries of fear. “Well, as you can see, that might be…tricky. He’s been this way near a fortnight. If you need him to make sense in a hurry, might be as I can give you some advice. Though he looks a man grown, Medrod’s still a little boy on the inside.” She then leaned over and whispered into Claire’s ear, “You might try bringing him a serving of lentils and chestnuts, his mother’s specialty. Stuff should be easy enough to find in Gridania. Oh, and a few soothing words wouldn’t go astray, either. Nothing like Mummy’s cooking and her expert ministrations for a skinned knee, as it were.”

Really? She was now playing the part of a mother to someone she didn’t know just to get some answers?

Claire rolled her eyes as she hissed all sorts of complaints within her own mind. Still, this was important and she could not risk turning this potential lead away. If someone was truly going around murdering others, then she had to do whatever it took to stop it. Thankfully, she didn’t need to go too far to find the bowl of stew. After purchasing a bowl from the proprietor, she headed back to Medrod and placed it in front of him. At first he didn’t seem to notice the bowl as he mumbled to himself the entire time.

“It was horrible…” she heard him whimper. “A waking nightmare… Cannot unsee… Oh, gods, what have I done to deserve this? Mummyyy!”

When he broke down sobbing, Claire had to bite her tongue to tell him to snap out of it as she waited for him to notice the smell from the soup. When he realized what was in front of him, he actually gasped, “You…you found it! This is my favoritest dish in the whole world! Mum made this for me whenever I felt glum, and it never failed to make me forget my—” But his fragile smile soon was wiped off as his head jerked up and stared at her, realizing what was happening, “Wait a minute! You’re trying to make me tell you… tell you… about that, aren’t you? No… Too horrible…”

Claire merely pushed the bowl a little closer as she gently began to soothe him, much like how Gundobald was able to calm Bertliana when she needed it most. She didn’t push him, she just shushed him as he slowly began to take in a few mouthfuls of the stew. When the bowl was half empty, he suddenly seemed much calmer and after a few more minutes of quiet, he seemed to finally have a grip upon himself.

“…Y-You’re right. It’s not as bad as it seems,” he said at last, and she was glad to hear that he sounded somewhat coherent again, “I saw something terrible, that’s true, but that hardly means I’m
going to suffer the same fate. Thanks to you, I can think straight again. I believe I can even recount what I saw without losing it.”

“I’m glad,” she said kindly, hoping that he could give her some kind of clue as to what was going on. “Please, can you tell me?”

He took a deep breath as he nodded.

“It was just another ordinary day,” he began slowly, still looking a bit shaky just recalling the incident, “I was headed back to the Float when I noticed a suspicious character in the distance — a masked man garbed head to toe in black. He had a hideous fiend in tow, a winged creature that was all eyeball and jagged teeth.”

She blinked, startled to hear that. A winged eyeball with jagged teeth? What on earth could that possibly be?

“Taken by curiosity, I crept as near as I dared…” he gasped out, “To see the corpse of a woman!” He soon began to wheeze and for a moment, Claire was certain that he was about to pass out. But after he took a few more mouthfuls of the stew, he seemed to calm down as he finished, “One glimpse was enough to tell me that she’d died a gruesome death! In that instant, I knew right away that the masked man was a minion of Thal, come to claim her soul for his realm.’

Somehow, Claire found that hard to believe.

“No sir,” she said, her voice as reasonable as possible as she tried to explain that she was trying to investigate this man. But as soon as she said that, Medrod yelped and gasped, “You’re investigating this same masked man⁉”

Medrod’s female companion looked over with new interest as she said, “If that’s the case, then, we’ll help you in whatever way we can!”

“Aye,” the Elezen added dryly. “Anything to ensure we won’t have to suffer Medrod’s hysteria ever again.”

“All right, teamwork!” Medrod said, filled with new hope and not registering what his friend had just said. “That’s what I wanted to — wait, I haven’t been that bad, have I…?” His Elezen friend laughed as he turned red and shook his head as he retorted, “At any rate, I’m all for helping this adventurer. It’s the least I can do to repay her for bringing me lentils and chestnuts!”

That was all it took? Wow, she heard that food was often the way to a man’s heart, she just didn’t realize how right that saying was true. She chuckled as the other two rolled their eyes, but didn’t look surprise by their friend’s antics.

The woman, who then introduced herself as Aideen, told Claire all that they knew of the series of deaths that were happening around the North Shroud as of late. First of all, all the murders had been with young women… and all of them had been killed the same way with their faces so badly slashed and torn that they couldn’t even tell who they once were. She then thought it over, believing that perhaps the simplest answer was that the Ziz who roam this area in packs could have been responsible for it. Claire highly doubted this, but she went off anywhere, at least hoping to find a clue to who could be behind it.

Of course, by the time she went out there, slayed a few Ziz, and returned, she was no closer to finding her answers.

“Yes, well, truth be told, even if there were proof, I wouldn’t know what it looked like,” Aideen
confessed, “Anyway, I believe we can safely strike ziz from our list of suspects, yes?”

Starting to feel that she was running around in circles again, she was half wondering where the nearest Wood Wailer was when Ivaurault, the Elezen, had another suggestion. That perhaps she should check out the rumors of the mysterious rock that seemed to be scaring the locals could give her any clues. Again, even after heading out to check the rock, she found new clues that could help her and she was seriously considering heading to the Serpents of the Twin Adders and holding a complaint at this point in time. The rock did not turn out to be a winged eyeball like Ivaurault swore it would, all it led to her was being attacked by a banemite and losing her claws in the process when the acid from its poison melted the leather.

With a cry of disgust, she quickly dropped them before the poison could touch her skin and quickly headed back towards the settlement before she would be attacked again.

“There’ve been no promising leads in the murders. I can scarce get a wink of sleep, knowing that the killer is still at large,” Medrod complained, looking around at his friends, who seemed as lost as he was. “Judging by your furrowed brows, I take it this sorry business troubles you as much as it does me.”

Ivaurault nodded in defeat, muttering, “I had been pondering my encounter. I was uncertain for a time, but there can be no doubt: it was a winged eyeball that I witnessed. It’s implausible that I could have mistaken so distinct a creature for a banemite.”

“But you and I were mals apart,” Medrod pointed out. “How could we have both seen it at precisely the same time? What’s more, our adventurer friend here had a run-in with the banemite at the very spot you claimed to see the fiendish eyeball. Isn’t that right?”

“There must be an explanation!” Ivaurault exclaimed, now sounding outraged at Medrod for even suggesting that he was lying or seeing things. “I know I saw an eyeball with wings — I would wager an apple tart on it!”

“Oooh, he’s serious,” Aideen joked at the idea. “But listen, mayhap it’s not a mysterious as we’re making it out to be. There’s no reason why there couldn’t be—”

But there could be couldn’t there…? The only possibly way she could think of a reason why two people saw the same winged eyeball creature at the same time but in different locations could only be if there wasn’t just one.

No sooner did she think of that did Aideen gasp, realizing where she was going with these thoughts, and explained, “Gods, of course… There must be more than one of the buggers! Ugh, it’s so obvious. But then that means… since there have been repeated sightings of these fiends… then there must be even more victims as yet undiscovered…”

That was not what she wanted to hear. While she was desperate for answers, or even a lead to follow, she did not want it to come at the expense of another young woman’s life. They all looked at each other, and Medrod gulped hard when he realized that even his friends were laughing at this disturbing thought.

“I-I do believe we’re out of our depth,” he decided, “We ought to leave the rest to the expert.”

“Y-Yes, we’re just civilians, after all,” Aideen agreed, patting Claire on the shoulder. “Good luck, adventurer. It was a pleasure knowing you!”

Claire rolled her eyes at that. She was not the type to go out and willingly let herself get killed like
Ivaurault meanwhile was sighing at that, but didn’t counter them as he told Claire, “While I burn to know the truth, some things are best left unknown. Lest you have forgotten, it was at the rocky area to the west that I had my encounter. Should you discover aught of note, you will want to alert the authorities. There is a guardhouse nearby. The Twin Adders there should be pleased for any information that pertains to the security of the region.”

Claire nodded, telling them all to be careful out there. While still slightly annoyed with them, she knew it was best that they didn’t look into this matter any deeper, for she did not wish for Medrod’s dark prediction that he would be the next victim to come true.

Instead, she bought herself a new staff, having a bad feeling that she may be needing to rely more on healing than fighting this time around, and slung it onto her back as she headed back out. After thinking over her next course of action, she decided that speaking to those at the guardhouse may be her best bet at this point. Still, she may as well head back over to where she fought the banemite, just to make sure that she didn’t miss something from last time.

There were plenty of Ziz in her way as she slipped around them, but no more banemites this time, which she was grateful for. After a thorough search of the area, just when she was confident that there wasn’t anything else out there, she spotted a glint of something white just sticking out from a rocky outcropping. Curious, she headed over there… only for her to cover a hastily covered gasp when she found a woman lying there… with something hovering over the still form.

As she looked up, she saw the creature turn as an enormous eyeball blinked and a mouth of razor-sharp teeth opened up and let out a screech. Claire felt as if her ears were being tortured at the noise, but she didn’t even think twice as she pulled her staff out and cast a protective barrier over her as the eyeball creature flew at her. It howled in pain as it hit as she cast a spell of water to knock it back from her before using the powers of earth and wind to kill it.

She breathed hard as she watched the creature fall to the ground and vanish in a puff of black aether. Cursing, she realized that the rumors of a winged eyeball weren’t as far-fetched as she thought and quickly gazed at the woman once more. A part of her hoped against hope that she wasn’t too late and that there may still be hope for her… but by the time she did get close enough, she knew that the girl was long since dead.

Shaking her head, she offered a prayer to the gods to speed this poor woman on her way to their halls, she turned the girl over to examine her closely. She gasped, almost leaping back when she saw her face… or what was left of it. She saw only a bloody mess of torn skin and muscle… where it was all but impossible to be able to recognize her. Unable to leave it just lying here at the mercy of fiends, she hauled the body up and onto her shoulders as she carried her all the way back to the guardhouse, wanting to at least find a way to bring the girl home to her family so that they could bury her properly.

When she arrived and explained what she found to the captain, he could only look on in horrified silence.

“Gods be good, not again…” he said as he bent down to examine the body himself. “No matter how many bodies I see, I cannot seem to get used to the horrid sight. Poor woman… Identical deaths have been reported in the Central Shroud.”

“How many have there been?” she asked him as he shook his head at the sight.

“We are beginning to lose count,” he confessed. “At first, we thought that they had just strayed too
far from the safety of the city… but so many killed the exact same way? No, this is without doubt the work of someone else.”

Claire then explained how she was here to investigate the rumors of the masked man, he thought it over, as if worried of how much he should tell her.

“While the masked stranger you seek does not seem to feature in any, sightings of the winged eyeball are common enough,” he explained slowly, “The creature appears to be moving the bodies, but to what end, none can say. The victims have all been young women. All are found with their faces mutilated beyond recognition. It’s been difficult to identify them, so as to notify their next of —”

He then paused in his explanation as he seemed to spot something. She looked over to see what it was that caught his attention, and in one of the young woman’s clenched hands, she realized that she was holding onto something. Her hands had cuts and scrapes… and the remains of rope burns… Claire reached to touch her own wrists as she remembered of when she was tied up before offered to Ifrit. This woman was tied up somewhere… but she tried to fight back… that would explain where the cuts came from… and it seemed that she managed to grab hold of something from her attacker…?

She watched as the captain pulled something small and glinting from her fingers and Claire realized that it looked to be a button. He examined it before holding it up to show her where Claire saw the image of a white flower painted upon the small wooden button.

“This button, engraved with a lily motif…” he murmured. “The very same object was found upon another victim. A family sigil, or that of an organization, perhaps? Either way, I dare to hope that this find will prove pivotal in solving the murders.”

So this had to be proof that whoever was killing these women were the same ones. Yet, she found it odd to think that Lahabrea would be wearing a button like this. To her surprise though, the captain stood and handed the button to Claire as he explained, “I would have you hold on to the lily button. You will need it to continue your investigation. While it isn’t standard procedure to entrust key evidence to individuals, your name is familiar to me, Claire – I know you to be reliable and resourceful, and so I see no reason why you shouldn’t carry on your work.”

She blinked, staring at him as he gave a rather weary smile. “Your reputation proceeds you,” he explained, “And the Elder Seedseer speaks most highly of you. So it is my hope that you will be able to find the answers needed to stop these murders before any other innocent women are killed. If I might make a suggestion, you may wish to take the button to Gridania and have it examined by Mioune. Mayhap someone in her vast network of contacts can shed light upon its sigil.”

“I understand, thank you,” Claire nodded as she took the button and made to leave. As she was turning though, the captain touched her shoulder, getting her to look back at him.

“I tell you this to be careful,” he warned her. “We have been trying our best to stop these fiends, but it has been difficult. Those few women who we have been able to identify… we have yet to find any real connection between them. None of them know each other, most come from different places throughout the Shroud… there doesn’t seem to be anything linking these murders together but for the fact that they were all young and… once very beautiful women. If we are right in thinking that these murders aren’t just random… that would make whoever is responsible for this even more dangerous.”

Claire nodded.
“I understand,” she told him, “And I promise to be careful. Thank you.”

She left after that, hurrying back to Gridania and reaching the Carline Canopy after the sun had reached its highest point and the some inn was full with people coming in for lunch. When she was spotted, Mother Miounne smiled at her warmly and waved her over to the desk.

“Good morrow to you, Claire!” she said brightly. Claire realized too late that she was still wearing her solemn frown and Mother Miounne paused before informing, “By your grim expression, I suspect you aren’t here for scones and herb tea.”

“I wish I was,” she sighed as she pulled out the button and told her, “But I’m on an investigation and I was hoping you could help me.”

When she set the button on the table, Mother Miounne examined it closely as she finished, “I was hop9ing that you could tell me if you recognize this button’s sigil?”

“Well, isn’t this a lovely little button,” Mother Miounne smiled at it, “The engraving is quite exquisite — artisan levels of quality, I would say. Where did you say you found this?”

Claire paused there, knowing that this wasn’t a pleasant line of thinking, especially at lunch.

She then explained how she came across it, which caused Miounne to freeze and quickly set it down.

“…On a dead body. Lovely,” she said dryly. “Anyway, I’m afraid I do not recognize the lily sigil. You will have to find the answer the old-fashioned way — by asking around. You could do worse than beginning with Bernadette, over by the Aetheryte Plaza. She has a sharp pair of eyes, that one.”

Claire thanked her and began to prepare herself for a long series of questioning random people for answers. To her surprise though, when she went to the Wood Wailer Bernadette, she confessed that she did see this sigil before, but knew little about it. She had seen an elderly man by the name of Ursandel with a button similar to this one at one point and that he was usually seen over at the Gentry’s Ward.

Claire found him easily enough… for he was the only elderly gentlemen by the time she reached the Gentry’s Ward. He was sitting upon a bench, with such a mournful face, that she could not help but wonder what thoughts were going through his mind to bring such a grim expression? Suddenly having a bad feeling about this, she approached him, politely introducing herself.

“I do not believe we are acquainted,” he said, looking up, “Pray leave me to my thoughts.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” she told him as she held out the button to show him, “I just wished to ask you a few questions about this sigil and I was hoping…?” But her voice died in her throat when she saw how he was staring at the button with wide and terrified eyes.

“The sigil of the Dartancours family! How…how is it that you came to be in possession of this button?” he gasped as he stood up.

So she explained about the recent string of murders and how this button was one of two that were found upon the bodies of some of the young women. But though he did grow pale at the confirmation of the murders, he did not look surprised.

“…From the body of a murdered woman…” he repeated softly before asking, as if dreading the answer, “H-Her face…was it marred in any way?”
Claire stared at him, knowing that she did not mention exactly ‘how’ the women were all murdered, and she nodded as he groaned.

“I had feared as much...” he sighed heavily, his shoulders drooping, grief in his face. “I can no longer feign ignorance. I shall reveal to you the truth of the deaths, but on one condition: you promise to put an end to my lady’s madness and free her from her torment.”

Lady? Claire stared at him, not understanding at all what he was trying to say. She could only nod, quietly promising she would do her best to help him, but he needed to be honest with her if he wanted that. This seemingly kindly old man had something to do with the murders? He did not look like someone who would kill all those poor women... but he seemed earnest in his desire to help.

“I will do all that I can, sir;” she promised, “But please, do you know who is responsible?”

He nodded grimly as he began to tell her everything.

“I was once a manservant in the employ of one of the oldest and proudest families in Gridania — the Dartancours,” he told her, “During that time, I had the honor of waiting upon Lady Amandine, mistress of the household. Fair as summer was she, and possessed of a heart befitting her radiance. Alas, the Calamity wrought a great change in her. Though my lady escaped with her life, death may well have been a kinder fate. Never will I forget the day her bandages were removed, and she beheld her disfigured face for the first time. At that moment, the kindly woman I knew ceased to be.”

Heavily scarred? It felt that some of the pieces were clicking together at that. A heavily scarred face may be the connection to why all those women’s faces were also mutilated. Was it possible that she grew jealous at the thought of her beauty forever gone that she could not bear to look at another’s face like that?

Ursandel sighed as she ran a hand through his aged hair and went on, “Unable to bear the thought of being seen, my lady sequestered herself within her chambers and refused all company. This continued for many uneasy moons, until one day, without warning, she began receiving queer guests. None among us knew whence they came, these masked men, but my lady believed that they would help her to regain that which she had lost.”

As soon as she heard the words masked men, she knew that this story could never end well. But upon hearing the word of ‘men’ she realized that it couldn’t just be Lahabrea... so there more of them? But why? What was their purpose? Why were they causing so many problems? First with the Sylphs, then Little Ala Mhigo... and now these murders?

“So began the ‘rites of rejuvenation’. These rituals seemed innocent enough in the beginning, but grew ever more grotesque as time went by,” Ursandel went on miserably, now wringing his hands, “Eventually, there came a time when my lady bound one of her handmaidens to her bed, and… and proceeded to mutilate the poor girl’s face.”

Claire’s jaw fell open at this revelation and Ursandel only continued to mourn this as if he was suddenly under a great weight.

“Suffice it to say, she did not survive the ordeal. It fell to me to dispose of her body,” he confessed and shook all over. “I performed the dreadful task as bade, obedient servant that I was, but when the time came to return to the house, my legs refused to move. I knew then that I could not go back to that place, not after the nightmare I had witnessed. So it was that I left Haukke Manor, my home for nigh on half a century.”
“Haukke Manor?” she repeated, but she wasn’t sure that Ursandel even heard her as he began to cry softly.

“Long did I weep for the girl who was slain, and longer still for the woman that Lady Amandine had been,” he confessed, as if unable to stop himself. “Yet one cannot weep forever, and I endeavored to put the matter behind me. Indeed, I had resolved never to speak of my experience… until you appeared before me.”

He fell silent for a moment before he looked imploringly at her and pleaded, “My lady’s madness must be ended, lest more innocent lives be lost. Lay her tormented soul to rest, as you swore to me you would. She awaits you at Haukke Manor, on the western edge of the Central Shroud. Go now. Go and do what must be done.”

Claire thought it over as she looked him closely in the face, seeing the grief and guilt there and found that she believed his words. He was truly remorseful for what he had seen and what he had to do… but fear kept him from acting on it.

“I know not what I can do to help,” she said, “But I promise to do all I can.”

She had to do her part to put an end to his madness before anyone else got hurt. And thought she felt rage at this Lady Amandine had done in her selfishness… her overwhelming feeling was of pity and sorrow. But also of anger towards these masked men who had tempted her to do such terrible acts and cost her something more precious than her beauty… her sanity.

She thanked Ursandel, who gave her clear instruction on how to reach the manor. Apparently the building had once been used by seedseers as a place for spiritual reflection and meditation, at least until Haukke Manor was seen as a symbol of excess and went against the what the people of Gridania stood for. After years of protest, the building was finally sold to a Lady Amandine’s family. When Ursandel was a young and healthy man, he went to work for the family, whom he had always seen as good people. After the Calamity, the Lady did everything she could to try and restore her beauty and lost a large portion of her wealth in the process.

From facial creams concocted from rare Coerthas honeys to shampoos derived from the milk of exotic phurbles, her daily ritual of beauty treatments escalated until it was rumored she was bathing in the blood of her virgin maidservants.

It seemed that she was so desperate, she finally sold her soul to these masked men in a final effort to ‘save face’.

Claire made it through the Central Shroud with little problem until she reached the great fallen tree that would take her up to the side of a cliff where the manor was. After reaching the top, she followed the smell of morbols, who had taken up residence within the now swamp-like area… the left-over result from the damage left over by the Calamity.

She quickly made her way across the bridge, not wanting to stop and risk being attacked by one of the disgusting morbols, before making it to a set of black iron gates. She forced her way inside, the gates making a loud creaking noise as she did so. Beyond was what had to have once been a beautiful building—a manor that had once been a temple it would seem.

She walked across the stone walkway as she gazed around, a dark and rather eerie sensation creeping up her spine and making her skin crawl. There was a small fountain in the center of the courtyard where it was full of dirty water and algae while more of those floating eyes stalked the area around them.
Well, if there was any possible doubt that this was the wrong place, it was gone now.

She hurried her way up to the front doors—the drifting eyes barely paying her any attention—as she wrestled with the door. After ten minutes, she finally managed to get it open to a point that the rusty handle cracked and fell off, allowing her inside. As soon as she stepped inside, she regretted ever coming here.

This place was just as creepy, if not worse, than the Deepcroft… and that place had dead things inside it!

The thick carpet muffled her footsteps as she looked around, met with the remains of what was once a spotless manor. She could see the faint traces that this was once a good place… a lovely place to visit… but now there was nothing left but broken furniture, cracking and creaking of the building as if it was crying in pain at what had become of it, and a thick layer of dust, mold, and grime covering everything.

Taking a deep breath, her staff in hand, she made her way through the manor. She tried the stairs first, only to realize that some sort of barrier was now being kept over the upper level so that she could not pass over it no matter how hard she pressed. It was truly just like in the Deepcroft when the Lambs of Dalamud had a similar barrier held up to prevent anyone from interrupting the ceremony. But…?

She looked around the manor, realizing that there had be something here that could serve as a key of some sorts. So she jumped down and began to make her way through the dark hallways. She wanted to say that there were no worse than those flying eyeballs but she would be lying. For what she found were so much worse. Every room she found there were all sorts of bats, slugs, and fungus lurking about… those weren’t at all hard to kill…

It were the remains of the maidservants and butlers that caused her stomach to roll. What could only be described as people at one point, but having been corrupted and warped into these dark creatures… these voidsent beings… there wasn’t anything left of them.

It was going to be a mercy to them… to finish them all off and allow their tormented souls to rest. At least, she hoped so. So, she would check every room she passed, and put all the people inside to rest once and for all… all the while trying to find some kind of charm that could be used to get her through that barrier. Because upstairs was where the Lady would be, she was almost certain of it. She made her way throughout the ground floor of the building before coming across another of the maidservants that had been twisted and turned into a horrible creature. She was the largest one yet, and was carrying a heavy looking blade as she came for her…

Claire took no joy in ending her life, but she knew it had to be done. By the time that the maidservant had fallen… she had disappeared into the dark… and Claire could have sworn that she heard a slight sigh of relief mixed in with the cry of pain.

She certainly hoped so.

But just then, she realized that the servant had dropped something in the seconds before he demise… a small green key…? At first she thought that this would be enough to open the barrier… but nothing happened. After looking around for a bit longer, realizing that there was truly nothing left on this floor, she did find another locked doorway that led to the cellar. It fit into the lock like a glove and opened the way for her…

Of course, down below were even more horrible creatures waiting for her… as well as what looked like bars and cells. What kind of place was this? It looked like a dungeon at one point? She didn’t
even want to know what went on down here. She just cleared it out of more of the servants, doing her best to put every one of them to the sword before moving about in a great circle. In one of the cells though, she found another key after killing another skeletal servant and examined the yellow key.

Once again, she found that the key did not work upon the barrier… but when she returned to the cellar to make sure that she hadn’t overlooked anything. She found another locked room where more servants were waiting for her. The transformed staff soon fell to by her hand and she sighed in grief, once more offering prayers to the Twelve to show mercy to these poor unfortunate souls. But where did that leave her now?

She had run out of places to search…?

But out of the remains of the skeleton, she heard a slight crumbling noise and she looked to see that from around the neck of the skeletal butler on a thick cord was a small rolled up piece of paper. Curious, she broke the cord and unwrapped the paper to see that the sheet was covered with dried blood… written in old ruins that she could make neither heads nor tails of.

However, if it was important enough to be locked down here with such protection then perhaps…?

Her guess turned out to be correct, for when she returned to the stairs, all she had to do was hold up the scroll and the barrier finally dropped for her, allowing her passage. She hurried upwards, pausing when she heard the wail of sorrow coming down from the hallway to the left. She paused, only for a moment as she glanced at the floating eye that was fluttering back and forth in front of a room, as if guarding it.

She made the side trip quick. She ran down the hall to find the remains of the rest of the household that had been transformed by whatever dark magicks that had transformed them from the beings they once were and she did her duty to help them rest. If she was going to put an end to this, she was going to make sure that they were all free.

When she, at last, felt that she checked every room but one, she made her way back to the stairs to where there was only that floating eyeball and she went for it. When it saw her, it let out a lout scream that could wake the dead as it swooped down at her. Claire was fighting with it, striking it down with her spells—but before she could put an end to it—the doors opened wide to reveal another room and it shot inside before she could land the killing blow.

The sudden surge of dark aether almost knocked her backwards and she watched as it flew to the other end of the room to where there was a large bed with torn hangings and a figure laying there as if resting. Claire held up her staff as the floating eye seemed to cause the person on the bed to stir. And then the figure slowly rose up and Claire got a good look at Lady Amandine… or rather, what was left of her.

A tall duskwight elezen floated off the ground, her skin a sickly shade of blue as a large torn-cape draped across her shoulders. She had a slim body and a long, forked tail that drifted between sharply legs while her close were skin-tight leather and silver ornaments. There were also horns that were long and protruding from the back of her head while a rather delicate silver crown was wrapped around her head, nestled upon her long dark hair that fell over her face. But the most frightening thing about her were her empty white eyes. When she saw her, Lady Amandine let out an echoing laugh that did not even sound like it belonged in this world.

But her gaze was soon drawn to Claire.

“Such a pretty face…” she all but purred when she laid her eyes upon her. “Your youth and
So the fight began as she cast spells of fire down upon her, forcing Claire to dodge and roll, forced to fight from a distance to avoided the fire. The fight was made even more difficult when the four large lanterns around the room began to light up and cast a powerful electrical charge that stun and hurt. She found that smashing the lights she could interrupt the spell long enough to turn her full attention back upon the demoness again.

At one point the demoness struck at her face, cutting it and was all but drooling at the blood that she felt dripping down her cheek. But as soon as the demoness tasted the blood that coated the tips of her claw-like fingers, she saw how her eyes widened in shock… as if she had never tasted anything so glorious as her blood. She then shrieked as she lunged for her, her fire and thunder causing the room the shake and tremble around them. She had given up playing around, now only fixated on Claire’s blood. Throughout their fight, she summoned Bombs into the room, forcing her to kill them before they exploded, as well as even more maidservants.

But Lady Amandine was no longer paying attention to how many servants fell. Her mind was only focused on one thing. Eventually, the demons finally caught hold of her in an almost loving embrace… where nothing that Claire did could even scratch the demoness at this point. In her frustration she allowed herself to get caught and Amandine stared at her hungrily… where Claire realized what she needed to do. She remained still as she recoiled when the demoness leaned in close and licked some of the blood off her face.

Her blood was so delicious to this demon that she didn’t seem to realize anything else that was going on around her…

Why that was, she did not know, only that it was going to be the last mistake this demon would ever make. Indeed, Lady Amandine was so lost in the taste, she didn’t notice how Claire had freed one of her hands.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered as she caused a sharpened piece of stone to ram the demoness from behind… impaling her and dealing the finishing blow.

Lady Amandine dropped her as she shrieked in agony, her hand reaching up to the heavens, as if pleading for help… before she slowly fell backwards and landed with a crash upon the floor and dissolving into a black haze… leaving nothing behind.

Claire was shaking as she climbed back to her feet, feeling the cut on her brow to wipe the blood from her eyes. The wound wasn’t deep and she cast a spell to close it before she looked around the now empty room.

“That’s all of them,” she whispered, hoping that she was right. As far as she could tell, she searched through every room of this manor and finished off every other creature here. It was over… at least until…?

“Darkness has taken root within these halls…”

She spun around at the voice, realizing that though she understood it, it was not in a language that she should know… but heard at least once before.

And through the dark room, she saw them. Two figures in black coming towards her.

“…Sprung from the most unlikely of seeds,” one of them answered as they observed her with curious glazes.
“One cannot help but admire the irrepressible spirit that quickened it to life,” the first voice added.

“Who are you?” she demanded, standing ready to fight, not liking what they were saying at all. But neither of them seemed interested in answering her as they continued speaking, more to each other.

“It is a pleasure to meet you at last, adventurer,” one of them said, speaking in a regular language once again. “You are every bit as intriguing as our master gave us to believe.”

Their master? Now that she looked at them, she realized that their masks were not the same kind that Lahabrea wore. So who were they? His servants? What did they want? Either way, she was prepared to bet that not only were they the ones responsible for the madness that took root here, but they had to also have been the ones responsible for what happened in Little Ala Mhigo. At that thought, she felt anger boiling inside her, struggling to break free and attack them both for the harm they did.

But the two just continued to gaze at her as if she was some piece of artwork on the wall.

“It is no ordinary mortal who can acquire one Crystal of Light… much less three,” the first one said, gazing at her as Claire’s hand instinctively went up to her chest to where the Crystals were still nestled. For the first time she felt as if the strange Crystals clung to her, as if afraid that they would be taken away from her.

But the two robed villains didn’t look interested in a fight.

“The Crystals make you strong, and it is to that strength that the Light is drawn,” the first one informed her. “Hydaelyn chose well.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Claire demanded, wanting answers.

But the second masked man just shook his head as he sighed, as if disappointed, “…A pity that your existence is irreconcilable with our own. We cannot well allow you to continue upon your present course. Alas, we came here not to play, but to take the measure of your strength for Master Lahabrea. That task now accomplished, we take our leave of you.”

“Wait… you mean…?” she began but the two of them were already disappearing into the dark, with their voices telling her with a whisper:

“Fare you well, Bringer of Light.”

And with that, Claire was left alone in the dark room… where she stood for a long time until she felt the lateness of the hour finally settle in. She left the manor behind, not even bothering to look back as she all but ran through the Shroud to get back to Gradania… not noticing how the one remaining floating eyeball came out of hiding and began to stalk the empty hallways once again.

*Later*

Claire reported to the Serpents of the Twin Adders what happened at the manor and that the one responsible for the murders had been dealt with before she returned to Ursandel to inform him what happened. As of yet, she didn’t tell the Serpents of his involvement in the manner, wanting to at least tell him everything that happened and hear what he had to say about the matter.

“You have returned!” he cried, leaping to his feet. “What sights awaited you within the manor? What has become of Lady Amandine? You must tell me all!”
Claire wasn’t sure how she felt about the matter. While glad to know that she put a stop to whatever was left of the once kind lady before any other innocent maiden was hurt… how it all ended left a bad taste in her mouth as those masked men continued to taunt her with her own memories.

Still, she forced herself to relieve all that happened at the manor and how everything was now dealt with. When she finished, Ursandel looked stricken.

“…So she went so far as to consort with devils. Would that I could have done more to prevent her fall. May she finally find peace in the beyond,” he sighed again. “I know not whether the masked men you encountered are the same pair that first led my lady astray, but it is plain that they are of the same vile brood. Should the chance ever present itself, promise me that you will visit upon them tenfold the woe they have brought upon others.”

She nodded, knowing that she didn’t need to make such a promise. For she planned to finish each one of them off. She would not rest until she saw each one of them finished for the harm they have already inflicted.

But with that said, Ursandel turned sad again as he began to mutter about what to do next.

“But who am I to speak of punishment? By my silence, I allowed I know not how many innocent young women to die in unspeakable circumstances… it matters not wherefore — through misplaced loyalty, cowardice, or both, I am an abettor to a gross crime,” he stated grimly.

“What will you do now?” Claire asked him quietly as he thought it over.

“I will surrender myself to the authorities and accept whatever punishment they deem just,” he decided at last, “I only pray that the gods will have mercy on my soul.”

Claire gave him a kind smile, relieved to hear that confession. He thanked her once again, and for a brief moment, some of the torment in his face seemed to have left it. He then told her that while he will forever have nightmares, he may, at last, be able to rest tonight in the knowledge that it was all over.

To her surprise, he kissed her hands and thanked her once again before he bowed low and left… heading off in the direction of the Adder’s Nest.

Claire watched him until he was out of her sights before she returned to the Waking Sands, knowing that she had to reveal what happened here to the others and inform them of what else these guys were capable of.

She as given a warm welcome back when Minfilia rose from her seat to greet her.

“Claire, welcome back!” she said happily. “Full glad I am to see you safely returned. Tell me, how fared you on your sojourn in the Twelveswood?”

Though she was dreading this, she filled Minfilia in on every miserable detail, including the words that the two masked men said to her before leaving. When she finished, Minfilia looked slightly green as she digested all that she learned.

“…Two of Lahabrea’s minions? …And they sought to measure your strength… by their own admission? The devils taunt us…” she said before shaking her head. “It is beyond doubt, then — the Ascians have begun to move in earnest. Would that we knew to what end. Yet I will not bemoan our plight. Thanks to your tireless efforts, we are at least aware of the encroaching darkness.”
Aware is one thing… being able to do anything about it was another. Though they solved this crime… she could not help but feel that they were no closer to figuring out what was going on than before this investigation. She was about request that she be allowed to investigate further on this situation when Minfilia continued on.

“Alas, we can only do so much,” she said, “It is clear to me now that we Scions are too few to protect the realm against this threat unaided. We must needs alert the three nations to the presence of this elusive enemy, and recommend that they heighten their vigil.”

She looked away as she finished, “There is no shortage of misery in the world that the Ascians might exploit. We have an arduous struggle ahead of us. Yet come what may, we must not allow ourselves to become lost to hope, for that is precisely what the enemy desires.”

But what is it that they want? That was what Claire was trying to understand and struggling to do so. She knew that these beings were causing no end of problems for them, she yet to fully understand just what their purpose was for causing all this. The thing was that no one seemed able to give her any real answers to her questions.

*Thancred*

“Glad to see that you could make it, Thancred,” Papalymo said as he greeted him at the door. “Y’shtola had already has everyone else here.”

“I wouldn’t dare miss what our dear Y’shtola has to say,” he said, forcing a grin despite the pain he was in. “She would never forgive me. Now, what is it that she has to tell us?”

“Not sure yet,” he answered as Yda was bouncing around on her heels. “Only that she felt that it was vital that everyone be here before she revealed anything. Apparently Minfilia has some rather disturbing news to share with us as well. She’s just finishing discussing something with Claire at the moment.”

“Well, let us not keep them waiting,” Thancred said with a grin.

“That’s a strange crystal, Thancred, I’ve never seen one like it,” Yda said suddenly as she looked over it.

“What?” he asked, his hand going to his throat to where he felt the stone. He looked down, slightly startled to see black crystal hanging from a chain as it laid upon his chest. Funny, he didn’t remember putting it there? But his head was hurting so badly that he wouldn’t have been surprised if he had forgotten about doing it. His memory was acting strangely lately.

“You aren’t normally one for jewelry,” Yda questioned curiously, “Where did you get it?”

Thancred was about to tell them about the masked man and how he dropped it when he fled… no, not now. Now wasn’t the best time. They couldn’t risk being distracted.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” he said, his hand grazing over the crystal, feeling it grow warm under his touch. “Just a piece I’ve recently obtained. I’m not sure I like it now that I think of it.” He then pulled the chain over his head and stuck it into his pocket. “At least I can say that it doesn’t suit me.”

She laughed as she waved, heading to the door so that she could head straight over to Gridania for her part in the mission.

Thancred waved back as he felt his hand graze over the crystal once again… when did he put it on a chain like this?
He pulled it out and glanced over it, watching the strange way that it seemed to reflect the light from the lanterns around him.

The more that he stared at it, however, the harder it was for him to turn his head away.

Right… now he remembered… it was on a chain when the masked mage dropped it when he escaped him. He was sure of that. Inside his mind, those thoughts sounded strange, because he honestly couldn’t recall if this was the case. But when he heard the voices inside the storage room, it knocked him out of his thoughts and he put the crystal away.

He was sure he could handle it.

But with the threat of Titan looming over them, now wasn’t the best time to bring the matter up with the others. He would wait until after this problem was dealt with before showing it to the others. That was the best thing to do right now.

Meanwhile he would be getting to work. He had a job to do after all… and he had to make it up somehow to their new friend since he was all but useless when Ifrit was at their door. But as he turned and headed to the door, planning on going to warn the Immortal Flames of the possible threat, he didn’t notice the way his shadow seemed darker than usual… nor the pair of eyes that were watching every move he made.

Chapter End Notes

(Last chapter before Shadowbringers! Need to focus on getting ready for the expansion, as well as real life, sadly enough. But that was why I made it extra long! Hope you all enjoy it. Again, I can’t promise if I will be doing another story for 5.0 since I don’t know what happens in it. But I will give you my answer before the game comes out!)
Lord of Crags

Chapter Summary

It feels like only yesterday that Claire fought her first primal... in fact, it was barely yesterday. Now a new primal is threatening the city of Limsa and she is asked to deal with the problem. But before she can even do something as simple as that, she first must win the approval of the Company of Heroes--the only other group of Warriors who had fought and defeated Titan. And to do that... she must first... host a banquet?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Thancred*

What in the Seven Hells was wrong with him these days?

Maybe this was all his fault, he could see now that him pushing himself so hard was finally starting to catch up to him. He felt constantly sick and tired, and no matter how much sleep he got last night, he was still worn out. He had been trying so hard to make himself useful to the others, to be worthy of the title of Archon, that he was now ruining his health to a point that he was starting to seriously consider going to a chirurgeon in the city for some help.

But then again, Minifila had called for an emergency meeting, and asked that everyone attend.

He decided that going to seek medical help could wait a little longer. He was running late by the time he had returned to the Waking Sands, with only their new prized adventurer friend being the only later than him.

“I am certain that she will arrive soon,” Minfilia told him when he asked where she was, “I had told her to take some rest. She had been very busy the last few days.”

“Ah, yes… I heard about that,” Thancred said, remembering some of the other Scions informing him of what they heard her up to lately. “Not only did she help build that bridge of peace with the Sylphs, find their missing elder, track down a mysterious black-hooded fellow responsible for several murders, and slew some kind of demoness in a haunted manor… I can imagine that she has been busy.”

In truth, he wasn’t sure how he felt about that. While he had grown quite fond of Claire in the short amount of time that she has been here, he couldn’t help but find it strange that everyone was putting an enormous amount of trust in her when they still knew hardly anything about her.

“By the way,” he asked her, “Did you learn anything new about her?”

“Like what?” Minfilia asked curiously when she looked up from some of her piles of paperwork.

In truth, he wasn’t sure why he was asking except that there was this new sense of curiosity about this hero who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. He explained this to her, and she thought it over.
“I suppose it is strange,” she admitted as she shuffled some papers, “Of course, with so much happening lately, we haven’t had much time to ask her. But she doesn’t seem too interested in talking about her past anyway. But I do not think that we need to worry. If she ever desires to talk about anything bothering her, we will be here to support her. It is the least that we can do to repay her for all she had done.”

Yes… yes of course… he didn’t know why it bothered him all of a sudden, but he just could not help but ask. He merely nodded in agreement, yet he could not help but feel a strange sensation of annoyance.

What was the matter with him? He knew that he had been feeling a little under the weather lately, but he couldn’t help but wonder just what was going on. Mayhaps he had fallen ill and it was a fever…? He reached up to touch his own forehead, but he didn’t feel hot… if anything, he felt a bit clammy.

Well, that made even less sense.

He could recall when their new adventurer friend first set foot inside the Waking Sands, how on guard she had been. She didn’t speak to anyone, at least at first. Indeed, until he finally coaxed a smile out of her when they were assigned their first task, he truly thought that she was mute or something.

But he found this quiet persona to be very calming to be around. Urianger was quiet too, but in a very different way. It was the kind of quiet that usually led to mild annoyance as one would sometimes struggle to understand. With Claire though, it was in a soothing kind of comfortable silence where if he wanted to speak, she would be happy to listen.

Lately, however, he had been more curious about her than anything else… to such a point that Y’shtola, who thought that he had his mind in the gutter, threatened that he leave her alone if he knew what was good for him.

“It’s nothing like that at all!” he reassured her as the Miqo’te glowered at him, “Truly! I merely am curious about her past that is all. Surely that can’t be that strange a thing to know more about your comrades?”

“Then why not ask her?” Y’shtola asked him with a shake of her head.

It felt like every task they assigned to her, every obstacle in her way, she would rise to meet it—already proving herself to be an important member to the Scions. It made him want to try even harder for him to prove his own worth to the Scions.

So when Minfilia asked another favor of their newest hero of the problems facing the Sylphs, and how they were asked to serve as an emissary of sorts to speak with their elder, he was excited about it. While he knew that the Black Shroud wasn’t an area he was overly familiar with, he was eager to join in to assist where he could…

But it was as if something in the back of his mind put a stop to it as he reminded himself that he would be out of his element here. Which is why he suddenly changed midway through his volunteer and instead suggested Yda and Papalymo to accompany Claire instead.

While he knew he was right, and that he truly wasn’t needed here, he couldn’t help but feel a little shocked at his own decision. It wasn’t until much later, when they were leaving, did he pause and ask himself why did he say that? In his head it made sense… but it was almost as if a stranger spoke those words.
That had been another thing that had been strange. Though they only worked together once before, and he didn’t notice it then, he suddenly found it very strange to be around her. Like being in the same room caused some kind of electric air that stung and hurt him. He had found himself smitten with beautiful ladies in the past, and he wasn’t ashamed to admit that more than once he felt the true pangs of love rush through his blood… but here… it wasn’t anything like that. No butterflies in his stomach, or longings to hear her speak… it was almost like it was just painful to have her near him and he didn’t like that feeling.

It was after that night he decided to go straight to bed… but not before taking a few more large books with him for a little more study until he fell asleep. But he barely laid back in bed did his vision come so quickly that he didn’t even realize that he had blacked out until he woke up. He was sitting upright, panting slightly, with a light sweat and feeling cold.

He had the strangest dream…?

He blinked, trying to recall it… only bits and pieces… he was standing in a dark dungeon… filled with thick webs and a constant drip of something eerily green and a strong rotten stench. He heard footsteps behind and turned around to see her… their hero standing before them.

He only laughed as he spoke, words that didn’t make sense to him escaping it, before darkness clouded his thoughts.

He let out a shaky laugh, telling himself that it was just a dream. Nothing to be concerned with.

At least, he was convinced it was a dream until Minfilia told him what their new friend experienced from her return from the woods. The way that they described the Thousand Maws of Toto-Rak…?

Just like that dream?

He suddenly felt sick to his stomach.

Since then, he would have more dreams… or rather nightmares.

He dreamt of whispering to several young Ala Mhigians of taking back their homeland… the screams of several poor women as they were brought to a horrid succubi before their faces were ripped clean off… his meetings with several Garlean soldiers as they wandered the woods…?

The countless hours he would spend watching after the Bringer of Light…?

He blinked suddenly at that thought. Bringer of Light? When did he start referring to her as such?

He was having a harder time trying to recall where he had been and what he had been doing. Sometimes he would lose hours at a time, the day going by so quickly that he would just blink and realize that night had long since fallen.

Well, when he thought it all together like that, then he realized how bad this sounded. Was he slowly losing his senses? His mind was one of the only few things that he was incredibly proud of and the thought of even that deserted him frightened him more than he could ever admit.

That does it. As soon as this meeting was over, he would go to the city and see a chirurgeon. If nothing else, to just tell him that there was nothing wrong and it was a simple matter of sleep deprivation or something like that.

With that thought to comfort him, he greeted the hero when she arrived… even though something in the darker parts of his mind seemed to recoil at her mere presence.
Claire awoke that morning, feeling particularly tired and had to all but force herself to drag herself out of her sleeping roll. She groaned, her back aching as she stretched out, and she could vaguely recall wishing that she had taken the Scions offer to sleep in one of the beds at the Waking Sands.

She knew that there were locations in each of the three city-states where there were plots of land that were set up specifically for adventurers to buy and build houses. Oh, if only she had enough money for that… that would be amazing…!

She allowed herself a moment to daydream of waking up in a bed inside her own comfortable house before she decided to get to work. She rolled up her bedroll before coming out from underneath the tree she had sleep underneath the night before, and began to head to the nearest settlement—looking for some more work to earn enough money for breakfast.

But she had barely set off when she received a call from Tataru, who was telling her to report straight back to the Waking Sands for an emergency meeting. It had been almost a week since she had last been called in for any type of mission; but judging from the anxiety in Tataru’s voice led her to no small amount of concern.

So, she abandoned her idea of breakfast that morning and teleported straight back to Horizon and hired a Chocobo to Vesper Bay.

Seriously, they need to come up with an easier way to get around here; it was a hassle having to teleport to Horizon each time she wanted to visit the Waking Sands.

Still, she showed up as quickly as she could, and Tataru ushered her inside, telling her that everyone else was already there and waiting for her. Indeed, by the time she walked into the Solar, all the senior members of the Scions were waiting there… and from the apprehensive expressions on their faces, they were all waiting for her.

They barely had time to even greet her before Minfilia stepped forward, her kind face unusually grave today as she explained, “The Maelstrom requests our assistance.”

“Concerning the kobolds they sent such copious notes on, I presume?” Y’shtola asked, and from her tone, it sounded like she had a guess to what this was about.

“Yes,” Minfilia confirmed for her slowly before adding, “And no. It has more to do with their findings, which portend a peril far greater than any beast tribe.”

“What sort of peril?” Y’shtola asked, eyes narrowing in concerned suspicion.

“The worst kind,” Minfilia said solemnly. “A tribe of kobolds in the vicinity of Limsa Lominsa has reawakened Titan.”

Titan? She thought that she had overheard that name before but her mind was coming up strangely blank at that. The others seemed to understand it though, for there were gasps of shock and horror coming from almost everyone and Minfilia sighed grimly.

“Our task will be to slay the primal,” she said, “The Maelstrom have sworn support for the endeavor. They are no strangers to the havoc kobolds can wreak.”

Y’shtola nodded, turning to Claire – who was still a little lost to what was going on or what they were talking about.
“Years before the Grand Company’s reformation, two primals, Leviathan and Titan, chanced to converge upon the seawall, wreaking untold devastation,” she explained, “There but for the grace of the Navigator were the mercenaries Merlwyb hired able to fend them off. Yet it did not take long for the beast tribes to regroup, and they summoned their primals once more.”

Ah, Leviathan… that a name she definitely heard before, and she recalled her time in Limsa and fighting off the Sahagin and the Serpent Reavers who spoke of Leviathan. She also recalled seeing, at least from a distance, the rat-like race of the Kobolds. So Titan must be their god… which means that another primal had been summoned.

“Thankfully,” Minfilia continued, “their second coming was decidedly short-lived — but that is besides the point. So long as tormented souls will them to exist, the realm will never be rid of primals.”

“The Maelstrom has kept a watchful eye upon the beast tribes — and the kobolds in particular — ever since,” Y’shtola added, “Which brings us to the matter at hand.”

Alright, now she understood. This new primal had been summoned and now jumped up to the top of their concerns. It seems that all their worry over Ramuh being summoned was now transferred here to the lands of La Nocesa. Yet, there was something she didn’t understand. Up until now, everything seemed to have calmed down, at least somewhat, since the defeat of the Serpent Reavers and clearing out the pirates off the coast. Why would the Kobolds resort to summoning Titan now? What could have happened that caused the Kobolds to panic and summon their god at the risk of summoning the Maelstrom against them?

Though, at the moment, she could only notice one thing. Claire didn’t like how they were all looking at her. But now that she thought about it, it seemed only logical that they would be looking to the one person in the room who had slew a primal before. Sure enough, what they said next all but confirmed her worst fears.

“Unlike Ifrit, we know scarcely anything of Titan,” Minfilia confessed ruefully. “Unfortunately, the only force known to have bested him — the modestly named ‘Company of Heroes’— disbanded five years since, and mercenaries are not in the habit of keeping chronicles.”

There was silence around them before Y’shtola summoned up what they were all thinking, “Expect the worst.” Y’shtola shook her head and then directed to her once more, “The Maelstrom’s help is of course appreciated, but even if we had their whole armada at our disposal, we could still find ourselves overmatched. A pity the kobolds lack the gentle sensibilities of the sylphs. A peaceful resolution would be more than welcome.”

Funny that they weren’t even asking her if she wanted to fight. She bit back that retort as Y’shtola then finished, “The Echo will not avail you this time, I fear. If you are to survive, your steel must needs speak for you. No one would think you a coward if you were to decline.”

Why? Why look to her? She just barely escaped with her life against Ifrit. And unlike then, there was no chance of being able to stop the summoning since Titan was already here. So she would have to go into that battle, knowing that there was no promise of coming back alive, and expect some giant horrible monster to be waiting for her. And the worst part, was that they didn’t even ask… they just sort of put her on the spot and expected an answer with no warning.

A definite ‘no’ was on her mind, but she suddenly felt the warmth of the crystals that she still carried around inside her and was reminded that she was given the power of the Echo for a reason. Perhaps it was for this reason…? Besides, what could be worse than fighting a creature of fire? At this point, it looked like the people had grown desperate and it wasn’t like there was time to sit
around and come up with another solution…?

So, against her better judgement, she nodded, though it couldn’t help but feel that she had just agreed to her possible execution.

Though she did not speak a word, she could see the relief in everyone’s faces when she agreed to help.

Thancred had his usual smile, though it was looking rather strained, and she wondered just how concerned he must be feeling about this whole situation. But when he spoke, though there was a slight sharpness to his usual cheerfulness, he sounded quite normal as he suggested, “We can’t very well send her to Limsa Lominsa without Y’shtola, can we, Minfilia?”

Minfilia nodded before questioning if Y’shtola would be up to that.

“I never thought it in question,” the Miqo’te answered evenly, as if she thought it the most obvious answer in the world.

“Ever reliable,” Minfilia said warmly with a shadow of her usual smile on her face. “Very well! We will spare no effort to win victory. You may count on the full support of the Scions of the Seventh Dawn, and all not afield will aid the fight from afar.”

She then clapped her hands together as she began to dictate orders to each of the others, turning first to Thancred and Yda as she asked, “Thancred, Yda, go to the Grand Companies. Tell them of our plight and solicit their support.”

They both nodded in full agreement before she turned to Urianger, who until now didn’t say a single word, and asked, “Urianger, send word to the Students of Baldesion — and Alphinaud, if you would.”

He nodded and gave a slight bow to his orders before she turned at last to Papalymo, requesting, “And Papalymo, compile all the information we have on Titan, little though it may be.”

There wasn’t as single objection, and they were all ready to do their part to help in this situation, and she felt a little bit better that she may not have to do this whole thing on her own. Minfilia seemed satisfied as she turned back to her and Y’shtola, adding, “You’ll be apprised of the tactical situation when you reach the Sailor’s Ward. May you walk in the light of the Crystal.”

They were all dismissed and left the Waking Sands, with Y’shtola immediately taking charge and told her to grab whatever she felt that she needed and to meet her at the docks outside their Headquarters as the others all set about their tasks.

“We will take a ship there,” she said, “Quicker and easier than heading back to Ul’dah and taking the airship there.”

Claire could barely nod before Yda came over and gave her a hug, telling her, “You be careful now! If you die out there, then I shall be very disappointed with you!”

She then waved before she went running off, already heading towards the forests as she looked after her, a little confused, and Papalymo sighed at that.

“Don’t let her words bother you,” he sighed, “She’s not the most… comforting person out there. But rest assure, we will do all we can to support you in this. You just focus on walking ahead, we’ll deal with the minor details.”
She nodded in thanks as Urianger gave her a light bow and Minfilia looked on with concern clearly shining in her eyes. Claire only forced a smile as she walked right out those doors, almost walking right into Thancred, who was just outside.

“Sorry,” she muttered as he looked down at her with a rather blank stare, as if he didn’t recognize her for a moment.

“Oh, Claire… sorry about that,” he said, running his hand through his hair tiredly, “I just… haven’t been myself lately.

“Are you feeling alright?” Claire asked him.

“Hm? Yes, yes, I’m feeling perfectly fine,” he reassured her with another one of those rather forced smiles. “I’ve just been tired lately. Anyway, you should be more concerned with yourself.”

He then gave a gentlemanly bow to her before doing the same for Y’shtola, who just reappeared behind them.

“Take good care of her, my dear lady,” he added to Y’shtola. “It would be a shame to lose her.”

“You…” Y’shtola said, shaking her head, “I’m not even going to reward that with an answer.”

“Ah, it appears that I have won in finally making you speechless,” he grinned.

“Ignore him,” Y’shtola told her before pushing Claire to the door, “If you try to say anything to that, it’ll just encourage him.”

Claire wasn’t sure whether to laugh or not, but she didn’t have time to really think about it because she was now being ushered towards the docks to take the next ferry to take them to Limsa.

The ferry to the city-state was quiet enough, but as soon as they stepped into the marketplace, they were surrounded on all sides by people. She could see the anxiety in each of their faces as they were now trying to buy up food and other supplies, readying themselves for the worst now that word had gotten around that a literal god had been summoned.

Claire could see the fear practically lurking in their eyes as they hurried their way through the crowds as quickly as possible, before heading up a slope that brought them outside the Culinarian Guild.

“If you think this is bad, you should have seen them the last time that Titan had been summoned,” Y’shtola explained to her.

“What do we know of Titan, anyway?” she asked her, “I know that Minfilia said that we barely knew anything about…?”

“I’m afraid that the only ones who have any real knowledge of Titan are those who faced Titan,” Y’shtola cut in, leading her to the direction of the Drowning Wench, “And sadly, most of them didn’t survive long enough to tell anyone. Other than the Company of Heroes, but we will cross that bridge when we get there. We will speak with the Maelstrom first as to grasp a bigger understanding of what happened before we try to seek out any members from the Company. Other than that, all I know for certain about Titan is that he is in command of the earth like how Ifrit ruled over fire.”

A being of earth…?
She remembered the last primal she faced and how he seemed to have been created out such a destructive element and she could not hide the shiver that went up her spine.

“Having faced against Ifrit’s flames, I am certain that you can appreciate how dangerous this will be better than anyone else,” Y’shtola said to her, yet it was in a calmer and gentler tone when she noticed her shiver… even taking the time to place a comforting hand upon her shoulder.

“Rest assure we will do all in our power to aid you in this,” she promised, “But it is still not too late to back out now. No one would blame you should you have a change of heart?”

“I came this far,” Claire said, knowing that it was a little late to turn back now.

Y’shtola seemed rather impressed by the answer as they passed through the Drowning Wench and arrived outside the Maelstrom command, where Commander R’ashaht Rhiki was waiting for them. Claire had seen her several times during the last couple weeks she had been coming in and out to see if there was any work waiting for her, but never did she recall seeing the woman looking so pale and anxious.

But the moment that the spotted the two of them approaching, she gave a rather relieved smile and greeted them. She was so distracted however, she didn’t seem to recognize them right away, until they explained that they were summoned to help with their ‘problem’ with the Kobolds.

“To business, then! It is as we told the Antecedent,” Commander Rhiki explained. “The kobolds have once again summoned Titan. A little over a moon ago, we began to observe the beastmen moving south in increasing numbers from O’Ghomoro. Our scouts subsequently confirmed the object of their aggression—”

Yet before she could finish her explanation, another voice, one more serious called out, “Crystals. Fodder for their fell primal.”

Claire turned and her eyes widen slightly to see none other than the Admiral herself entering the command. Commander Rhiki saluted respectfully as she and Y’shtola turned to greet her.

“Thank you, High Commander,” the Admiral said formally, “You may leave the rest to me.”

But Merlwyb turned her full attention to Claire almost right away, not even giving the Commander time to answer. Merlwyb studied her for a moment before saying, “Word has spread of your accomplishments, Claire. On behalf of Limsa Lominsa, I thank you for heeding our call.”

Claire nodded back as Merlwyb sighed and said, rather mournfully, “We are no strangers to conflict. Long have the Sahagin and the kobolds plagued our people — nor is this the first time we have had to address a primal threat. In the past, when Titan rose to threaten the peace, it was to the Company of Heroes we turned. But they are long disbanded, and we must look to other brave souls blessed with the strength to face this foe. So it is that we turn now to the Scions of the Seventh Dawn, confident in the belief that you are Limsa’s best hope.”

So… no pressure, then?

“I hope you are right,” Y’shtola said dryly, but was sounding very skeptical for some reason as she then stated rather loudly, “Yet the situation is far from simple. The kobolds are not prone to unprovoked aggression. Did not the thalassocracy make a pact with the beastmen that each would keep to their own lands, and that no blood would be shed? And was it not the Lominsans who violated this agreement, dissatisfied with their lot? Shall we then condemn the beastmen for defending their homes?”
Claire looked up to the Admiral for confirmation, but the woman didn’t so much as bat an eye. She didn’t agree with what she said, however she didn’t contest it. Was that all true?

But that seemed to be all the answer that Y’shtola needed, who shook her head and commented, “Even a pirate must one day reap what she has sown.”

Commander Rhiki gasped at that, as if she had just said the worst possible thing at this moment. “I would advise you to choose your words with greater care, Lady Y’shtola!”

Merlwyb, however, shook her head, waving her hand at her to silence her.

“Stand down High Commander. She has the right of it,” she said, her eyes never leaving Y’shtola as she admitted, “And the wrong is mine. Freely do I claim it. Yet it makes little difference. Remorse will not shield us from Titan’s wrath.” She paused, raising a brow. “…Or would you have us fall upon our swords?”

“My apologies, Admiral,” Y’shtola replied with a slight bow, though her tone clearly told Claire that she wasn’t sorry for speaking her mind. “The safety and security of Limsa Lominsa’s citizenry are, of course, of paramount concern.”

That was true, but Claire couldn’t say that she was happy about the situation… even less so now. It sounded to her like the Kobolds were the ones who were the victims here and that it was the Lominsans who were in the wrong. Still, she couldn’t deny that a lot of people were going to get hurt if this Titan primal was allowed to roam free. So, while she disapproved of the people breaking their treaty with the Kobolds, she didn’t see why the innocents should suffer because of this.

Merlwyb turned back to Claire just as her mind was made up, and she said, still speaking formally, “Already, we have observed disruptions in the flow of aether further inland. The effects will be felt here in the city ere long. I ask much of you, I know, but the need is great. Can I count on your help, Claire?”

She nodded, not daring herself to speak unless she tell her what she really thought of this situation. Her opinions didn’t matter right now with the shadow of Titan threatening all of Limsa. Regardless of who started this, Titan needed to be stopped before anyone got hurt. She could still recall the look on the people’s faces… both from Limsa that they ran into mere moments before, and the dazed, crazed looks on Ifrit’s tempered… she didn’t want to see that again if she could help it.

“You have my thanks,” Merlwyb replied, “along with the full support of the Maelstrom. I await good tidings.” With that, she departed, already barking orders for several soldiers who were standing off to the side, to prepare for the worst.

As she watched her go, Y’shtola explained in a whisper, “That the kobolds should summon Titan demonstrates they are no longer amenable to negotiation. This being the case, we must needs prepare for conflict. Before we meet Titan in the field, however, it would be wise to learn all we can of our foe. And I can think of no better source of information than the mercenaries who defeated him once before.”

That was when Commander Rhiki spoke, quickly informing them, “The Company of Heroes may be no more, but several of its former members still live. It is said that one of them is employed at the Grey Fleet mills in lower La Noscea.”

“Quite why a mercenary should choose to become a miller, I do not know,” Y’shtola said, voice dry once again. “When you find him, mayhap you could ask him for me, Claire. I, meanwhile,
shall seek his fellows.”

Alright, so this sounded promising.

The two of them set off on their own, both of them looking into any leads. She hurried down south to Lower La Noscea, to where she met this supposed former mercenary.

However, he was far from impressive. In fact, after being challenged to a contest to see which of them could break through a boulder at a faster pace, it was revealed that the man—Trachtoum—was nothing more than a liar who was claiming to have been part of the famed Company of Heroes. Of course, she suspected that when he kept calling Titan ‘Tidus’. Seriously, if you were going to go around pretending to be someone you weren’t, you would think that he would have gotten the facts right.

The reason he was doing this was to get free food and money, as well as shove all his chores onto others. The miller who hired him, decided to give this some serious thought to what he was going to do with him, and Claire silently hoped that this would be enough to cause him to turn his life around.

Yet that didn’t seem to be the case, as matters turn out, Trachtoum had already tried that when he had been employed over at Costa del Sol, where an actual member of the Company of Heroes, found out about his lies and tossed him out. A man named Wheiskaet, who was now the head guardsman over at the resort. Claire had ventured onto those sands a couple of times while she explored La Noscea, but never came to the Restort. Yet now, seemed like a good time to pay a proper visit.

She travelled out towards the west until she saw the golden sands waiting for her, and the luxurious huts that were built up right upon the water. She went around to several others who were working or visiting the area, asking about Wheiskaet, before they pointed him out up to the decks. He was an older Roegadyn dressed in decorated armor and a sharp looking axe settled upon his back. Now this was the appearance of a warrior… unlike that Trachtoum fellow.

“Excuse me?” she asked as he turned his gaze to observe her with the air of a man who wouldn’t hesitate to cut her down if she started causing unnecessary trouble.

“Yes?” he asked gruffly.

“Are you Wheiskaet?” she asked him, “Of the Company of Heroes?”

“Hmph,” he grunted, but she could see the way his eyes sparkled at the mention of his old travelling name. “What of it, lass? You looking to hear some story?”

“Sort of,” she said, and she explained who she was and that she was with the Scions of the Seventh Dawn. How they were tasked with destroying the primal Titan before too much damage was done. She was here to ask him what he knew of Titan and hoped that whatever he had to say could help her defeat him.

At the mention of Titan, his entire attention turned to her as he raised an eyebrow.

“Pardon?” he asked, though she knew that he was aware he heard what she said, “You wish to slay the Lord of Crags?”

“We must slay him, Captain,” came a voice, and she looked back in surprise to see that Y’shtola had suddenly appeared. She gave Claire a quick smile, in a way that suggested that she found no other leads, but her trail led her here—same as her. Y’shtola then looked to Wheiskaet as she
finished firmly, “The people of Limsa Lominsa are depending on us.”

Wheiskaet snorted incredulously at that, as if not believing a word that she said as he grunted, “You fancy yourselves heroes, then — just like in the tales?”

“Be not so quick to judge,” Y’shtola snapped back, taking the time to introduce themselves. “Long have I labored for the well-being of you and yours. And my friend here has bathed in Ifrit’s hellfire and lived. She is blessed with a power that protects her from primal influence. Thus was she able to lay low the Lord of the Inferno.”

Wheiskaet seemed to be impressed with that news as he looked to her. Claire felt self-conscious at being pushed onto the spotlight like that, but nodded back, confirming what Y’shtola said.

“We know full well the risks, and have taken every possible precaution,” Y’shtola said, “We lack only the knowledge of how to enter Titan’s lair. Pray be so good as to grant us the boon of your wisdom, and we shall be on our way.”

Wheiskaet didn’t agree to help them, but he didn’t turn them away either. He was clearly thinking it all over.

“A woman who can’t be tempered?” he repeated thoughtfully. “Useful… but it will not be enough. It is true that the Company of Heroes fought and felled primals — but each victory was bought with the lifeblood of brave men and women. And Titan was the worst we faced. Aye, we defeated him — in the end — but he took from us some of our very best. Even if you possess the power you claim, I have no reason to believe you will succeed.”

On one hand, Claire could understand his hesitation. But this was out of their hands. She and Y’shtola tried again and again to convince him to help them, that they couldn’t just abandon Limsa to Titan.

“You two are passionate, I’ll grant you that…” Wheiskaet sighed finally, “And you deserved better than the greeting I gave you. But I will not send you into O’Ghomoro on a whim. To be plain, I do not wish to see you give your lives in vain.” He crossed his arms as he thought for another moment and then decided, “At the very least, I must have assurances that you are more than common adventurers. I oversee security for Master Gegeruju’s estates. Perhaps you can demonstrate your abilities by attending to one of our—”

“Ye gods, man—” Y’shtola cried out in frustration, looking ready to shake the man right then and there as she threw her arms up and continued, “Have you heard nothing I have said? We have not the time to perform trivial tasks. The enemy is at the gates!”

But Wheiskaet wasn’t moved by her words. Treating her as how a parent would deal with a child who was throwing a tantrum, he shrugged and said, “Do you imagine words can sway me, girl? If you dislike my conditions, then you are welcome to find your own way into O’Ghomoro.”

Y’shtola spluttered at that, glaring with obvious fury, while he stood there as unmoving as a statue. After taking a deep breath, Y’shtola grabbed Claire by the arm and marched a few felms away as she said to her with a force resignation, like it was the last thing she wanted to do.

“Though it pains me to admit it, Claire, I fear we have no choice but to acquiesce to the man’s demands,” she confessed quietly, while shooting Wheiskaet a nasty look over her shoulder, “Yet much remains to be done if we are to beat Titan. Forgive me, but I must ask you to undertake this
task alone. I will use the time to see to the remaining preparations.”

“It’s alright, Y’shtola,” Claire reassured her.

What other choice did they have? Wheiskaet was their best hope to finding a way out of this mess, but he clearly wasn’t going to give up the secret easily. She would just have to do her best to make sure to get through all of this as fast as possible.

Y’shtola clapped her on her shoulder before she hurried off, leaving Claire alone to take on Wheiskaet’s tasks. She turned to him as he continued to observe her with a critical eye.

“Master Gegeruju’s requests can be more demanding than you realize,” he warned, “Before I set you to your true task, I would like to verify that this won’t be a waste of my time. A nix has recently been seen prowling the beach to the east. As you can imagine, my master does not want large slimy creatures anywhere near his lands. The beast is cunning, but you should have no difficulty luring it out with herring. Slay the nix and return to me with proof, if you would.”

Was that it? She had to do his chores first before even taking the test? She couldn’t help but wonder if it turned out that this guy was a liar like the last one. But she turned and left without another word, not wanting to give him the satisfaction as she marched down the beach.

She didn’t have to go far to find the slimy toad waiting for her. She had come across several of the gigantoads across Eorzea, and ripping off a leg wasn’t too hard. It made the mistake of hitting her with its slimy tongue and pulling her in close before she rammed her blade into its wide mouth.

Wheiskaet seemed more amused than impressed when she came back to show him the leg.

“Very well, then. Lest you think me overly cautious for testing you in this way,” he said to her, though she noticed that he didn’t sound very sorry about putting her to such trouble, “you should know that we had an incident not too long ago. A foolish young employee was dismissed for lying about his past. He claimed to have served in the Company of Heroes, but I knew for a fact he did not.”

Oh, the irony.

“Anyway, now that the pointless busywork is finished, I shall give you a challenge as befits your talents,” he went on as she folded her arms and waited. He then cleared his throat and explained, “Two highly distinguished individuals are scheduled to visit Costa del Sol in the near future, and Master Gegeruju wishes to welcome them with an elaborate banquet. But while money is no object, not everything Master Gegeruju desires can be so easily purchased. It is to be an extremely exotic feast. And so, Claire, your mission is to seek out and obtain the rare ingredients our chef requires.”

So, her job was to hunt down rare ingredients to some banquet? Why does it feel less like he was testing her and more like he was just giving her his grocery list?

“It will be a long and arduous journey, but you need not toil alone,” he explained, “Many of the mercenaries who once served under my command still live, and they will guide you in your quest.”

Knowing that she had no other choice in the matter, she nodded with a sigh. She didn’t want to do this, not with the shadow of another primal looming over their heads, she knew that this was her best option to getting the answers she needed. She would just have to work as fast as possible.

“For the first ingredient, I would have you travel to the South Shroud and speak with Landenel at Camp Tranquil,” Wheiskaet ordered.
“The South Shroud?” she repeated with a yelp, “That’ll take half the day just to get there!”

“What?” he asked, not caring if he had told her to marching halfway across the realm for some stupid ingredient. “Do you mean to tell me that you cannot afford to waste time, as your associate did? Adventurer, if you have not the endurance to complete this mission, how do you expect me to believe you can outlast the Lord of Crags? Either do it or don’t — I have work to do.”

She somehow doubt that last part, but she had to bite her tongue before turning on her heel and went marching out. Why did she have a bad feeling that wasn’t going to end well?

While she privately felt that she was just wasting time, she did what he told her, and teleported away. Thankfully, her other missions in the past were serving her well, for she was able to teleport straight to Quarrymill, where she was able to rent a chocobo the way south. She had rarely had a reason to come out this far, since this area was mostly swampland and full of morbols, but she knew she was about to be given the chance to properly explore this place.

*Later*

What a day.

First she had been sent out all the way to the South Shroud where she met up with Landenel, where he told her to go out and poach a giant adamantoise egg from its nest. Not only did she suspect that it was illegal, which was something else coming from a Wood Wailer, he made the effort to warn her how dangerous and difficult the task would be. Truly, it wasn’t nearly as hard as she had been expecting. All she had to do was wait until the adamantoise left the nest, and she dashed in to grab it before anyone noticed. Sure, she had to deal with an angry adamantoise when it turned and saw her in its nest, but otherwise, she had tougher jobs than that when she first started out.

Well, once she handed the egg over, Landenel promised to ship it back to Costa del Sol for her, before telling her to get on over to southern Thanalan and speak with a man named U’odh Nuhn. Great, sent to another distant location. However, she did have access to the aetheryte crystal at Little Ala Mhigo, and could take a chocobo the rest of the way to a place called the Forgotten Springs, which was home to the U tribe.

Claire had never been to this part of Thanalan before, and it was just an endless expanse of hills made of sand. She hurried across the dusty cliffs, ducking into a cave, and walked along a long tunnel—grateful for the cool shade. By the time that she climbed out of the tunnel, dusk had fallen, and lights scattered around the little oasis that bloomed in this desert were being turned on.

U’odh Nuhn was very disinterested in her at first. He demanded that she first prove herself with slaying a couple of monsters and bringing back bottles of their blood. Seemed like a waste, but she did what he commanded, before he sent her to hunt down something called a Wellwick worm.

Once again, the task he set up for her wasn’t that hard. It was almost too easy for her to lure the worm out and put it to the word. The more that this went on, the more she really suspected that she was just doing someone else’s errands than proving that she had what it took to take on Titan. Unless Titan turned out to be a giant worm or adamantoise, she really didn’t see how this was supposed to prove anything to anything.

Still, she did what she was asked to do without a complaint, and brought back the meat, before U’odh Nuhn took the meat—promising to send it back after it was properly smoked—and gave her a bottle of brandewine for her to take back to Wheiskaet.
But he was far from done with her.

“Now, you have but one ingredient left,” he explained, “Fortunately, you will not have to travel to Aldenard this time to obtain it.”

“And it is…?” she asked slowly.

“Truth be told, I never intended for you to collect this last ingredient,” he said, though she highly doubted that, “Brayflox, my old quartermaster, wished to bring it to Costa del Sol herself. However, not long ago, she sent word that there’s been some trouble at the Longstop, and that the delivery would be delayed indefinitely. She told me nothing of the incident itself, but I fear the situation may be dire. Though I would like nothing more than to aid her myself, I have no choice but to turn to you. Make haste to the Hidden Falls docks and speak with Ozun Nazun. He will direct you to Raincatcher Gully, where Brayflox and her people have made their home.”

Silently hoping that this next ingredient will be as easy to obtain as the others—though she suspected otherwise—she left the resort behind and headed to the northwest, to where she took the ferry to the Gully. The skipper at the docks, directed her to a place known as the Longstop, where he had seen a lot of goblins lately.

It turned out that the goblin was none other than Brayflox, who had been waiting for her.

“Questprize of uplander deep in Longstop.” Brayflox said to her, “Flighty-beast chased gobieflock from homes. Gobbieflock needs goodly uplander give safety to Longstop with much hand-lending!”

Claire wasn’t sure what she meant by flighty-beast, but she was ready to find out. Now this was a little more like the sort of ‘test’ that she had been expecting. She was running through the swampy part of the gully, fighting her way past drakes, opo-opos, and all sorts of creatures as she searched for this monster that was causing trouble for the goblins. After battling against swarms of dragonflies and helping the goblins fight them off, she soon found the creature that was attacking them in the form of a full-grown wyrm.

First time she had dealt with a dragon of this size… and boy was she really hoping that it would be her last.

This certainly wasn’t what she was expecting, but hey, she was rolling with it.

By the time she confronted the wyrm in its layer, she thought that the worst it could do was spit fire… turns out that this beast was spewing out pool of poison. Soon she was coughing and wheezing for breath, the fumes of the poison quickly filling up the whole cavern. Her eyes were watering so it was becoming painful to see, and almost impossible to avoid the gnashing teeth and swiping claws before she pulled up a bandana to cover her mouth and noise to filter out the worst of the fumes.

It wasn’t easy, but she was able to bash the head back with her shield before she slicked her sword through the skull and into the brain.

She made her way out of that cavern as fast as she could and back into the fresh air. Brayflox soon greeted her back at the entrance to the longstop, only too happy to see her.

“Goodly uplander has thanks of gobbieflock!” Brayflox said cheerfully, shaking her hand, “Flighty-beast was tricksy foe, but uplander outwitted with plansmaking. Uplander has goodly head for battlethink. Brayflox happygives tastyfresh gobbietreasts to clever uplander!”
Claire only nodded, not trusting herself to speak for a moment before she quickly left the cavern where she could wash up in the river and get the poison off her. After a couple bottles of antidotes that she always kept on hand, and spitting out the remaining bit of poison in her system, she was ready to head out.

She met with Bryflox once more, who thanked her again for her kindness. She then handed her a small wrapped package, where she told her, “Cheese is stinkysweet gobbieturn! Specialmake with secret gobbiemagic! No party complete without gobbi gouda, Brayflox everyday!”

As she was leaving, Claire peeled back the wrappings to get a look at the cheese. The smell of it was almost enough to knock her out… in fact, she half-wondered if she had been poisoned once again.

She spent the rest of the way back to Costa del Sol gagging and coughing—wondering who could have the stomach to eat something like this? All she knew was that she was quite happy to hand the package over to Wheiskaet when she got back.

“I gather you solved Brayflox’s little problem?” Wheiskaet asked her as she panted, merely holding up the parcel of cheese, too out of breath to even speak.

He took the package and after one whiff of the cheese, it all but knocked him off his feet.

“By the gods, that unholy stench!” he wheezed out, panting as hard as she was, “This is — ugh — definitely goblin cheese. Judging from the smell, this should be quite flavorful.”

“Good,” Claire said, “Now… is that all that you needed?”

She had truly thought that was all… how naïve she was. It turned out that there was still one last ingredient she was supposed to get, due to Wheiskaet’s explanation, “What good is an exotic feast without an equally exquisite aperitif? Before we can discuss Titan, you must first bring us a suitable wine.”

All in all, she was ordered to head over to Wineport and pick up a bottle from another member of the Company of Heroes in the form of Shamani Lohmani.

Thankfully, with this run, she wasn’t forced to fight against a giant wyrm or anything like that. Thanks to a series of strange events, she not only was able to find and kill a large goobbue, but found a cutting from an extremely valuable vine and thus revived the wine industry in Wineport, and she was given an incredibly rare bottle of wine to take back with her. The whole thing kinda went over her head to how it all came together, but seeing the joyful expressions on the vintners’ faces, she couldn’t help but feel a small twinge of pride inside for helping to bring those smiles there.

*The Waking Sands*

“So there were troubles concerning the Sylphs?” Alphinaud had asked Minfilia when he entered the Waking Sands, a couple weeks after he and his sister went their separate ways. He was with Minfilia, Y’shtola, Yda, and Papalymo as they were discussing everything that had been happening as of late.

“Well, we know now that they are more likely to embrace peace than shun it,” Minfilia confessed. “Which is a great load off our minds. At least for now.”

“But they summoned Ramuh once before, did they not?” he asked.
“Yes, and that is where the confusion started from,” she told him. “Gridania was terrified that the sylphs will resort to summoning their primal sometime in the near future. But at the same time, the Elder Seedseer did not wish to break the treaty between their people. They have enough problems with the Ixal and Garuda, who is one of them most savage and terrible of all the primals that we are aware of.”

“And that is why the Elder Seedseer had asked for assistance?” Alphinaud asked. He knew that this was a delicate situation and if they were to win the sylphs favor, they would have to be as diplomatic as possible. “And… let me guess… you sent Claire off ahead to investigate?”

“She had the best chances out of any of us to win their favor,” Minfilia answered. “She had been spending much time in Gridania and Little Solace for these last few weeks.” She then looked up to Papalymo and Yda and added, “As well as you two. You were just finishing up on the matter, were you not?”

“It went about as well as we could have hoped for,” Papalymo smiled. “It turns out that the reason the sylphs had been acting so strangely as of late were for two reasons. One of which is that there were imperial soldiers in the Twelveswood.”

“Soldiers?” Alphinaud asked in surprise. “What were they doing there?”

“We’re not quite aware of the reason for that just yet,” Papalymo confessed.

“Yeah, but we do know is that they were capturing sylphs,” Yda piped up. “And to make matters worse, the Sylph Elder went missing because of the imperials trying to catch him.”

“Yes, thank you, Yda,” Papalymo said firmly, clearly not appreciating being interrupting like that. “The point is, to escape the Garleans from capturing him, he fled into an abandoned dungeon called Toto-Rak and was almost killed there. But thankfully Claire took care of it and rescued the elder in the process. Thanks to her we were able to bring Elder Frixio back to his people and resolve the matter peacefully. She had stayed behind a little longer to bring a message from the sylphs to the Elder Seedseer. The sylphs seemed to have grown quite fond of her in the time that she stayed with them.”

“Yeah, they looked kinda sad to see her go,” Yda laughed. “I think if they could’ve, they would have her live there with them in the trees. Funny thing is though, they didn’t seem nearly as sad to see me and Papalymo go…?”

“Good thing for us then that they understood that we need her as well,” Papalymo answered. “And I have to say that it was nice to work with someone who isn’t such a scatterbrain. Unlike some here I could mention.”

“Who?” Yda asked curiously.

“You just proved my point,” he responded.

“HEY!” Yda yelled back.

“And the second reason for the sylphs hostility?” Y’shtola asked, breaking them up before it turned into a fight.

“Right, well, the second is that many sylphs, all those who took part in summoning Lord Ramuh the last time, were tempered,” Papalymo informed them.

“Well, that explains a lot,” Y’shtola sighed grimly.
“Yes,” Papalymo told her sadly. “We have written it all down in a report so that you can read it later. But for now, disaster is averted and everything worked out better than we had hoped.”

“I see. That is good. However, I was also told that there has been a rumor going around about a man in a black robe and a crimson mask who was responsible for a number of murders in the Black Shroud as well,” Alphinaud stated curiously as he looked to Minfilia.

“I had Claire investigate him as well,” Minfilia admitted. “She had to travel all the way to Little Ala Migo and worked hard to earn their trust. She managed to save some reckless youths from getting killed at the hands of the Amalj’aa. But it turns out that they got into their heads of summoning their god to retake their homeland from the Garleans. Apparently, they learned about summoning from that same black-robed man. Up until recently she had been in Gridania, and had been investigating those same murders. Apparently things had been solved there for now.”

“Unfortunately we had to call her back once we received news that a group of Kobolds had summoned their primal… Titan,” Y’shtola added bitterly.

Ah yes… he heard about that also.

While Y’shtola was the one leading this mission, he knew that they all looked to Claire to slay the primal. Who, he wasn’t surprised to learn, had agreed to do so. But he was more interested in how this happened. He had thought that there had been some kind of pact made with the Lominsans and the Kobolds so he could see no particular reason why they would resort to such an extreme.

In the wake of the Calamity, both Limsa Lominsa and the Kobolds home of O’ghomoro had been badly damaged, and neither side was willing, or able, to cause any unnecessary bloodshed. And so they had made a pact. Like how when children were angry with the other and they would draw a line in the sand, was much how the pact went. Both sides promised to keep to their lands and there would not be repercussions. While far from perfect, it did prevent an all-out war up until now.

When he asked about it, it was Y’shtola who confessed that it turns out that the Lominsans broke this pact by suddenly trying to take more land. And it was because of that did the Kobolds summoned their god in an attempt to protect themselves. When spoken like that, he could hardly blame the Kobolds for their anger.

But regardless, Titan needed to be dealt with.

Along with the Sahagin summoning Leviathan, Titan had been summoned before a few years back. The two primals caused an unbelievable amount of damage before they were eventually slain. Apparently, it was the work of some mercenaries, known as the Company of Heroes, who had done the deeds.

With Claire already having experience in dealing with primals, as well as the Echo, she was the perfect person to turn to for help in this matter. Both Yda and Papalymo had left the room to continue doing their parts to search for information about Titan and to ask for possible help from the other Grand Companies. Alphinaud was soon left alone in the room with Minfilia and Y’shtola, who seemed to be holding back a towering temper.

“I’m amazed at how well she’s taking this,” Y’shtola told them, sounding exasperated after Papalymo dragged Yda out with him, reminding her that she still had work to do, and plenty of it. He was just scolding her into heading back to the Adder’s Nest as Y’shtola continued to complain.

“What’s the problem?” Alphinaud asked her.
“The leader of the Company of Heroes, that’s what,” she hissed. “He refuses to help us without us proving that we’re capable of fighting Titan.”

“I would have thought that he would be aware of the damage that letting a primal loose can do?” he asked incredulously.

“He knows, he fought against Titan the last time he was summoned, and only he and the other members of the Company know how they managed to gain entrance into Titan’s chambers,” she complained. “I’m working with the Malestrom to ready themselves for the worse in the meantime, but I thought I would give my report in person before I return to Costa del Sol. We had no choice but to humor him and do whatever he asked. Claire has been sent on a ridiculous mission around Eoreza to run these ‘tasks’ for them.”

“Dare I ask?” he asked her.

“I do not know, but I do know that if I were the one who had been forced to do this, I would’ve accepted it with much less grace,” she muttered with a sigh. “I swear, I don’t know how she does it. Does she ever complain? No, not once. Anyone else would be ready to kill someone by now.”

“I’m more surprised that this man is willing to do all this meanwhile Titan’s shadow is covering Limsa,” Alphinaud stated, shaking his head in amazement.

“That’s not the half of it,” she said. “From what I heard, he sent her to Gridania to poach a giant adamantoise egg before she went off to the Forgotten Springs in Southern Thanalan to hunt for a Wellwick worm.”

“Is there a point in this?” he asked incredulously.

“I’m seriously wondering about that,” she sighed. “But from last I heard, she’s now dealing with a certain matter up in Wineport. Something about wine and some goblins causing trouble. He sent her to one of his old comrades this time… a goblin by the name of Brayflox. I do not envy Claire right now.”

“Whatever happens, return there and support her in any way you can,” Minfilia said firmly. “No matter how tedious it is, she’s our best hope to putting a stop to Titan before any damage can be done.”

“You make that sound easy,” she muttered with her hands held up helplessly. “I’m about ready to give them all a piece of my mind. If what I guess is right, then they will have a lot to answer for.”

She then turned and marched out, calling back that she promised to have a report in when she found the time, assuming they weren’t all killed by Titan first.

“I almost pity those men,” Minfilia could not help but speak out once the angry scholar marched out. “They don’t know what they are in for.”

*Claire*

Claire returned to the seaside resort in good time, just as twilight was beginning to settle in. Claire bit back the urge to laugh hysterically at the situation, before she handed over the bottle of wine to the man, hoping that this was the last thing that he needed from her because she wasn’t sure how much more of this she could take.

Though, truth be told, she couldn’t help but find some amusement in his shocked expression when he got a good look at the label.
“Seven hells, a 1547 Bacchus?” he gasped, “Even I know how rare that is! I have to admit, I didn’t think you had it in you… But congratulations, Claire.” He still seemed to be too stunned to think of anything else for a moment before remembering where he was and cleared his throat as he added, “Thanks to you, this will be the most luxurious feast Costa del Sol has seen in years.”

She didn’t even bother to answer, feeling worn out after crossing over what felt like the whole of Eorzea in the last day on foot. Yet it seemed that she still wasn’t done yet, for Wheiskaet asked, “I hate to impose further after everything you’ve done, but would you mind helping Drystweitz lay out the banquet? Our guests of honor are already here in Costa del Sol, and so Master Gegeruju has demanded we finish preparations immediately.”

How she was able to prevent herself from yelling out in frustration, she didn’t know, but instead of cursing this man out, she asked, in a voice of determined calm, “Very well. But I must ask, who are these guests? You never mentioned their names?”

“How? The guests?” Wheiskaet shrugged as if they weren’t of any import, but there was a twitch at the mouth that she recognized right away as to be hiding a smile. “Oh, I’m told that one is a beautiful Miqo’te scholar. Personally, I’m more curious about her companion, some famous adventurer with an endless list of accomplishments. But you can judge for yourself soon enough. Anyway, go and lend Drystweitz a hand. The poor man is liable to collapse from the stress.”

She headed over to the table where the chef had already finished preparing the food. And from what she could smell, it was divine… making her mouth water at the sight of it all. Yet, it was strange… it certainly didn’t seem to be set out for nearly enough people for a big event… more like for only a handful of people. With how much effort had gone into the ingredients and preparations, she had expected it to be a grand celebration.

But once everything was set up to the cook’s expectations, Claire returned to Wheiskaet, and saw that Y’shtola was only a few yalms away, sitting on a low bench, and seemed to be having trouble keeping all of her frustrations bottled up inside. Claire didn’t see why she was the one who was upset since she wasn’t the one who had spent the last day and a half running all across Eorzea.

Hopefully, once Wheiskaet tended to these ‘guests’ of his, then he would be willing to depart the knowledge needed to finally take on Titan. They wasted so much time already that it was a wonder that the primal didn’t go marching across the beaches by now. Then again, after all of this, she couldn’t help but think that fighting a primal might be a cakewalk compared to being on the receiving end of the Company of Heroes and their… ‘tests’.

Once the man spotted her return, he waved her over.

“Excellent timing, Claire,” he grinned, “Now that both our guests are present, the feast can begin!”

Claire glanced around, but seeing no one other than them… that was when a sudden suspicion began to dawn on her and she couldn’t help but curse herself for not putting the pieces together sooner.

“….Where are these guests of ours…?” she asked slowly, and Wheiskaet seemed to guess that she was figuring it out.

So he just laughed before telling her, “Where are they, you ask? Why don’t you ask your associate? I’m sure she’ll be happy to explain.”

Oh, this was just evil… and when she looked at the look on Y’shtola’s face, it all fell together who these beautiful Miqo’te scholar and famed adventurer were. Though, Y’shtola’s expression was
stormy, she approached her, who sighed, forcing a rather bitter smile despite her anger.

“You have the look of a woman who has been to the seventh hell and back,” she said, shaking her head in disgust. “That a guest should be expected to supply the victuals for a banquet held in her own honor… And this while the shadow of Titan looms over us all! It beggars belief.”

Claire looked down at her battered clothes, seeing how they stank of the swamplands and plastered with mud and caked with sand. There were rips and tears from the birds that clawed at her, and the holes where the poison from the dragon had spit out as she was forced to run for her life. And as she shook her head, a few stray bits of leaves came free from her fight with the goobbue… further reinforcing that she had been through hell and back.

“I can only applaud your stoicism,” Y’shtola informed her sympathetically, “Had I been asked to endure such ignominy, I fear I should have accepted my lot with less grace.”

“Y’shtola,” she said, “I fear I don’t understa…?”

But before she could finish her question, a cry called out.

“Lady Y’shtola! Lady Claire!”

They both looked up to see a richly dressed Lalafell running towards them, leaping up, and landing on his knees and bowing his head in a deep apology.

“A thousand pardons for this extreme discourtesy! I was wholly unaware of your true identity, madam! Had I known, I would never have permitted my man to subject you to such unspeakable ordeals!”

Claire stared at him, startled, having barely a moment to recognize him as none other than Gegeruju, the master of the resort, and now even more lost than ever to what was going on. So if it wasn’t him who was behind this, then what was the point? What was going on here?

“Come now, she must have sensed something was amiss,” came Wheiskaet’s voice, and she looked up to see the man coming towards them. But he wasn’t alone. Behind him were none other than the other members of the Company she had met with during her latest ‘errands’.

Landenel, U’odh Nunh, Brayflox, and Shamani Lohmani all marched over with identical grins on their faces as they waved at her.

Claire had time to look over each one of them before her gaze fell onto Wheiskaet questioningly, who grinned and asked, “You didn’t seriously think I would send you running the length and breadth of Eorzea for a banquet, did you?”

But Y’shtola wasn’t going to sit there and let him mock her as she snapped back, “Spare her your mockery, Captain. Your intent was unclear to even me until this moment. And unlike me, Claire has no knowledge of your traditions. Mayhap you would be so good as to enlighten her.”

“Aye, aye,” Wheiskaet said with a chuckle. “Fair’s fair. There’s no sense hiding it any longer.”

“Hide what?” Claire asked, feeling irritation now replace her surprise.

“We five were chosen by our brothers and sisters, and before the Company of Heroes disbanded, we each swore a solemn oath…” he answered back, finally explaining what whole cause of this, “That any who would follow in our footsteps must be weighed and measured — not by their reputation, but by their deeds. Each man would judge these would-be god-slayers by his own
criteria. If even one found her wanting, she would be rejected without a second thought. But if she proved herself worthy, we swore that we would do our utmost to support her cause.”

So going around to each of these places and gathering the ingredients was all part of these tests? To see if she was worthy to fight a primal? Damn, these guys don’t play around, do they?

For a moment though, it looked like Wheiskaet aged about ten years as he sighed grimly.

“The world has ever been full of brave souls eager to give their lives for a righteous cause, but all too few capable of making a difference with their sacrifice,” he explained, “To send wave after wave of hapless adventurers into the jaws of a foe against whom they have no hope of victory is worse than futile. Titan is not one to be challenged lightly, and we will not be complicit in the deaths of the unworthy.”

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“Which is why the five of you deigned to test Claire with such commendable thoroughness,” Y’shtola pointed out acidly. “Time well spent, I am sure. But tell us, Captain: what is the assessment of you and your fellows?”

Landenel was the first to speak up.

“She’s a brave one, that much is certain,” he told them all, giving Claire a playful wink, “She willingly walked into the midst of danger, despite my repeated warnings that it could cost her her life.”

“Her skill is undeniable,” U’odh Nunh added with a purr deep in his throat. “She stalked her prey as relentlessly as any Child of the Sands, and struck with precision when an opportunity presented itself.”

“Too many adventurers these days care only for fortune and glory. Claire, however, is a kind and generous soul,” spoke up Shamani Lohmani grinned with a friendly wave, “I am certain she has no shortage of loyal allies who will gladly fight at her side.”

Claire was feeling as if her face would burst into flames from all the praise.

“Wily uplander is talentful plansmaker,” Brayflox finished up, confirming her seal of approval as well. “Tricksy foe for mighty rockman!”

After hearing each and every single one of their statements, Wheiskaet crossed his arms, nodding to himself in approval before turning back to Claire.

“I can only concur with my colleagues’ assessments,” he told her, “We five of the Company of Heroes hereby judge you a worthy challenger. Cast down the Lord of Crags, Claire Faye, and write a new chapter in the history of Eorzea.”

But first thing’s first… they all sit down to enjoy the banquet. And after all of that, Claire realized that her stomach was completely empty and she was running on nothing at that moment. Y’shtola was looking hesitant, but after all the work that Claire had to go through to help prepare it, both of them felt obligated to at least pretend to enjoy it. But Claire couldn’t lie in that this was best meal that she had ever tasted in her life. Once the food was gone, out came the 1547 Bacchus and glasses, and they raised them up in a toast. Oh, it made her very tongue tingle the entire way down. Claire didn’t think she would ever find a wine anywhere near as good as this again…?

The party continued well into the night before everyone decided to call it a night. Wheiskaet reasoned with Y’shtola that the last thing they wanted was to have their champion fighting against Titan half asleep, where the Miq’te grudgingly agreed; and even promised to bring her a change
of clothes when she awoke.

Claire had been given a hammock where the cool ocean winds rocked her gently to sleep, and she fell into a deep slumber, having the most fitful night of sleep she had in a long time.

When she awoke the next day, she found that Y’shtola was a good as her word, and left a box containing some new pieces of armor and soft undergarments for her to change into.

By the time that she was up and dressed, she felt ready to take on an army of primals.

She left the hut that she had been given to, looking around for all the others, and found that Y’shtola was already up and waiting for her.

“You are very kind to indulge them, Claire,” Y’shtola replied. “This banquet is as much for the Company as it is for you, whatever they may claim.”

Claire was aware of that, seeing how happy everyone was to be reunited with each other and catching up on their stories and many adventures they had together. It looked like everyone else was up, and were getting ready to head back home, but everyone stayed long enough to greet her when she awoke, shake her hand, and promised that they would be expecting her return shortly.

“And when you get back, we’ll have another party!” Landenel waved off happily, where she waved back.

“So long as you are the ones getting the ingredients this time, I’ll be fine with that,” she informed them as they laughed and headed down to the beach.

“I do not deny that they mean well, but now is scarcely the time for celebration,” Y’shtola reminded her, bringing her back to the matter that she was called out here, “Though they have all but pronounced you the victor, the battle with Titan has yet to begin. The hour has come for the good captain to make good on his promise. We must speak with him again.”

She nodded, some of her good mood fading at the reminder that there was danger waiting for her in the form of some rock giant. At least, that was the impression she got from the others. She and Y’shtola tracked down Wheiskaet, who seemed to have waiting for them.

“You must be eager to face Titan,” he said, and any trace of cheer was gone as he spoke very seriously. Causing Claire to remember that he knew better than anyone how this battle with Titan could very well end up. Still, they all seemed confident that she would return alive, and she decided to do all in her power to prove them right. She wasn’t going to let that little adventure be for nothing, after all.

“As promised, we will show you the way,” Whiskaet informed them both, “Travel to Bronze Lake in upper La Noscea. There you will meet with Riol, another man who once served with the Company. To ensure that this knowledge does not fall into the wrong hands, he will remain in hiding until you have given the correct signal. I realize this may seem excessive now, but you will see that it is more than reasonable once you comprehend the risks inherent in our method.”

Just what she didn’t want to know. Just getting to Titan sounded like another long obstacle. Still, she and Y’shtola nodded and thanked him before hurrying off. Claire had not been to this part of Bronze Lake yet, and therefore had no idea where to travel to. But Y’shtola knew all of Limsa like the back of her hand, and was able to guide her through to the quickest way that she knew. They took a boat from the docks, all the way to Aleport, where she lead her north, just past the caves where she knew led to the once pirate-filled Sasatasha, and through more of wetlands.
“We will take the ferry when we get there,” Y’shtola promised. “That will be on the very outer reaches of Bronze Lake. There are a series of hot springs, which were later crafted for Maelstrom members who were injured in their battles with the Kobolds, where they can rest and recuperate from their injuries. This had better be worth the trek.”

It seemed that Y’shtola was still in a sour mood and so Claire knew better than to test her temper right now.

One ferry ride later, they arrived on the crumbling ruins of what Y’shtola explained to be the remains of what was once known as the City of Nym. She even pointed out across the lake to where a rather imposing fortress stood looking over them. Y’shtola explained a little that until the last Calamity, all of these ruins had been underwater and they had no idea about any of it until the damage caused most of Bronze Lake to drain out.

“The damage was severe all across Eorzea, stretching as far as parts Ilsabard to the East, and past Ishgard to the north,” she explained as they walked up the stone steps where she could feel the comfortable heat of the springs around them.

They climbed up to the designated location that was out of sight of the pools and Claire gave a loud whistle. They didn’t have to wait long though, for a man quickly arrived before Claire even lowered her fingers from her mouth.

That was when a man arrived. He had a few scars on his face, but otherwise looked fairly young with blonde hair that reminded her of the color of golden wheat, and a black patch over one of his eyes. He stepped out with an easy grace, his hands in his pockets, and a rather boyish grin on his face.

“Greetin’s, lasses,” he said as he held up his hand in greeting, “Might you be the ones the cap’n said would come callin’?”

“That would be us, yes,” Y’shtola confirmed as Claire nodded.

“Aye, I thought so,” he grinned, looking them both up and down, “Pay attention, now, ‘cause I ain’t explainin’ meself twice. Years ago, when we was weighin’ up how to get to Titan, one of our scouts stumbled across this beastman aetheryte, see…”

Claire tilted her head in confusion to that last part, which the other two noticed.

“That would be us, yes,” Y’shtola confirmed as Claire nodded.

“Aye, I thought so,” he grinned, looking them both up and down, “Pay attention, now, ‘cause I ain’t explainin’ meself twice. Years ago, when we was weighin’ up how to get to Titan, one of our scouts stumbled across this beastman aetheryte, see…”

Claire tilted her head in confusion to that last part, which the other two noticed.

“Not familiar with ‘em?” Riol asked her before Y’shtola interrupted him to explain the situation.

“He speaks of unamplified aetheryte which has been claimed by a beast tribe,” she quickly said, “Lest you wonder, there is no fundamental difference between such aetherytes and those which you have used on countless occasions, Claire.”

“Ah, that’s right, yer the Sharlayan lass,” Riol noted with an approving nod to her.

Y’shtola waved her hand impatiently at him before she finished, “The tunnels beneath O’Ghomoro form a bewildering labyrinth that no outsider has ever fully explored. How the Company of Heroes managed to navigate it is a mystery I have long pondered.”

Riol laughed at the question, giving her a winning grin as he informed her, “Give us a bit of credit, love! We weren’t daft enough to try goin’ in the front. The kobolds are always diggin’ new tunnels and fillin’ the old ones with traps. One wrong step, an’ the next thing you know, ye’ve got a hundred tonzes of rock on your noggin. Suicide to even try, see?”
So then, how did they get through it? They clearly found a way in with little problems. But the answer he gave was remarkably simple, and she couldn’t help but wonder why they didn’t think of it themselves.

“Funny thing was, the kobolds didn’t seem to have no trouble findin’ their way ‘round — an’ it was that as got us thinkin’,” he told them, “I mean, the O’Ghomoro Mines are like a bleedin’ city, ain’t they? An’ getting’ around in a city that big would be right pain in the arse if you didn’t have an Aethernet, wouldn’t it? So it stood to reason that the kobolds must have one, didn’t it?”

So they used the aetherytes to take a shortcut to the heart of the city where Titan was. Very clever. But would it work a second time for them?

“Hm,” Y’shtola hummed to herself, before saying, “Even if there were aetheryte shards in the depths of O’Ghomoro, you would have needed to attune yourselves to them before you could identify their signatures within the Lifestream.”

“Ah, well, that’s where yer wrong, love,” Riol said with a grin. “We had this Sharlayan bloke to help us, see. Delivered us right into Titan’s bedchamber, he did. I don’t rightly know how he did it, but I do remember him sayin’ it weren’t nothin’ any Sharlayan scholar worth her salt couldn’t manage.”

“…Did he now?” Y’shtola growled, as if offended by this Sharlayan bloke had indirectly insulted her. Well, she could tell that Y’shtola was not going to let this challenge pass her up and crossed her arms as she thought it all over. Claire watched for a moment before she said, “It is possible. In theory, at least. Yet I cannot be certain until I try. Plainly, all will depend on whether or not I am ‘worth my salt’.”

Hopefully, since she was going to be the one testing this theory out.

Claire gave her a smile, knowing that if there was anyone here who could get her into that chamber, it would be her. All she had to do was hold out long enough until the way was open for her to face Titan.

At last, Y’shtola gave her a true smile as Riol laughed at this, excitement so clearly bubbling inside him that one would think that he was the one about to set out on a great adventure. He clapped his hands together and asked, “Well, why don’t we all go to Zelma’s Run an’ take a closer look at the aetheryte? It ain’t far.”

He led the way out of the springs, pointing up north, saying that it was just a short walk from here.

But now that they were so close, Claire felt her resolve falter slightly when she realized that Titan was within reach now, probably just below their feet. Did the ground just shake at that thought? She could only swallow as the painful memories of Ifrit towering over her returned to her and the battle she had with him. She had nearly died against a primal before, and now here she was expecting to fight against another… and this was supposed to be stronger than Ifrit was.

She could only hope that she was ‘worth her own salt’.

*The Waking Sands*

Alphinaud spent the next few bells with Urianger, as they both compared notes and exchanged what they had learned of the Ascians. He was a very insightful man, and Alphinaud never realized how much he missed having someone match wits with him when it came to a difficult problem.
It was just after sunset did Minfilia inform them of the progress with Titan.

“Y’shtola is incensed,” she explained, sounding almost amused as the little sylph named Noraxia hovered at her side. “It turns out that the Company of Heroes had Claire running all over Eoreza for ingredients for a banquet. One held in her honor.”

“What?” was all he could ask, “How could they think of food at a time like this?”

“That’s just what Y’shtola reported in,” she answered. “She said that Claire looked like she had been to the seventh hell and back by the time that she was finished and the Company of Heroes was satisfied that she had proved her worth. But what amazes me most is that she was forced to fight a dragon for that goblin that Y’shtola had mentioned. She escaped with her life after slaying the creature… and apparently she played an instrumental part in helping to revive the wine industry in Limsa all in the course of a few days. It’s unbelievable.”

“This banquet better have been worth it,” Alphinaud muttered darkly. “But Claire has the answers she was looking for?”

“Apparently,” Minfilia answered. “They claim that they now have a plan. A risky one, but if it works out, they should be able to get her right into Titan’s chambers and fight him.”

“Brave one is strong one indeed!” piped up Noraxia happily.

“Yes, she is,” Minfilia smiled at her. “But what she must do next is the real challenge. For she now faces Titan. And we know next to nothing about him except that he commands the earth itself.”

“I see,” Alphinaud said. “I will be awaiting the report on Claire’s success. Keep me informed.”

*Claire*

The ride to Zelma’s Run was quick since it was just outside the hot springs, and she knew they had found the right place from all the Kobolds that were patrolling the area. Riol had accompanied them to a slightly quieter part of the canyon wall, where they found a massive growth of glowing crystals embedded into the very rock.

“So this is the aetheryte the Company of Heroes used to gain access to Titan’s Sanctuary,” Y’shtola said, looking it up and down with great interest. “Hm. It is as Papalymo speculated. In its present state, this aetheryte’s signal will not be strong enough for our purposes. I may, however, be able to use my own energies to amplify it.”

Claire had little idea to what it was that she just said, but she followed enough to understand that if she wanted to get in and out of Titan’s chambers, she would need to have Y’shtola out here getting the aetheryte to cooperate for them. But that also meant…?

Y’shtola turned back to Claire, looking regretful as she confessed, “Alas, the task will monopolize my attention for the duration. I’m sorry, Claire, but it seems you will have to proceed without me. I must needs remain here and supplement this beacon’s power, lest you be denied your only path of escape.”

The idea she was going straight into this mess on her own, no backup, no real plan, no idea how Titan fought, and she was expected to go up against that thing with nothing more than a sword—which suddenly felt no different than a stick at that moment—was the very last thing she wanted to do.

But Y’sthola had turned her full attention back to the aetheryte, examining the crystal with interest.
“Fear not,” she added, “I will summon the Maelstrom forces stationed nearby to protect us. With
effort, it is possible that I may be able to stabilize the aetheryte’s signal and thereby join you, albeit
belatedly. Until such time as I do, you will regrettably be on your own.”

Oh, great.

Though, she wanted to ask how Y’shtola thought she could help since she didn’t have the Echo.
There was a great chance that she would become tempered by Titan just by being in the same room
with them, and just that thought alone frightened her. She didn’t want Y’shtola to suddenly turn her
attention to healing Titan.

Y’shtola then clapped her hands together, seemingly found the answer she needed, and said,
“Now…let us see if I am worth my salt.”

She lifted a hand, shimmering with magic, and Claire watched as the aetheryte began to glow with
the infusion of aether. Claire watched on before Y’shtola turned her head to her and quickly added,
“I have located another beacon — one far below the mountain. I can only speculate as to what you
will find there, so… best of luck, my friend.”

Once again, she had to question her life choices.

But, she remained long enough for a handful of Maelstrom troops gathered around them, their
weapons drawn, and ready to defend the aetheryte crystal and Claire no longer had any excuse to
delay her departure.

She took a deep breath, taking a long drink from her water pouch, feeling that she was going to
need it, and stepped up to the crystal. She reached out to touch it, and let herself be carried away.

It wasn’t the same as the crystals she was used to travelling by. Most of the time the ride was
smooth and quick… here, it was rough and she felt as if her very being was vibrating almost
violently. But the ride was over quickly and she landed hard on stone. She coughed on some dust
before she quickly stood up and got a good look around the room with wide eyes.

She was standing in a vast cavern, so large that she struggled to find the walls that surrounded
them. But she knew that she was deep underground, seeing the tall stalactites that hung from the
ceiling, and glowing crystals that cast the area around in that eerily orange light. She stood upon a
large platform of stone that was infused with more of the yellowish-orange crystals that were filled
with earth aether. She took a few shaky steps forward, seeing several lanterns and banners that
decorated the walls.

That was when she heard squeaking coming from several rocky outcroppings and high plateaus
that stood away from the platform she stood upon.

“Look, an overdweller!”

Her head jerked up at once to see a group of Kobolds looking down at her from one of the plateaus,
and were freaking out at the sight of her.

“Yes, yes, an invader from above! She uses our aetherytes against us!”

“She has defiled Titan’s sacred sanctuary!” another screeched in alarm, “Trespassed, violated,
defiled!”

She gritted her teeth at the sight of them all, doing a quick headcount… a dozen… two dozen…?
Oh, they didn’t think about this, did they? Fighting off an army of Kobolds before facing a primal?
She pulled out her sword, ready to fight, yet it seemed that they didn’t think her to be any real threat as one of the other, larger Kobolds, dressed in thick and heavy metal, called to them all from high above one of the tunnels over their heads.

“Brothers and sisters, fear her not!” he called in his squeaky voice, causing many below to squeak in surprise at how disinterested that their leader was acting. Instead, he held up a scepter as he pointed at her, “Her fate shall be decided by the Lord of Crags!”

At that, the Kobolds on the lower levels backed away as the leading Kobold addressed her, “Hear me, overdweller! You and your treacherous brethren must be held to account for the breaking of the covenant! You shall be the first to face judgment! Then Limsa Lominsa and her oathbreakers — liars, betrayers, oathbreakers!”

Claire’s heart ached slightly to be reminded that they weren’t wrong, but she also had to remind herself that this needed to be done. But she wanted to tell them that she bore no grudge against them and had no intention of hurting any of them… it was only Titan that she was after.

The kobolds raised their hands in a familiar gesture of prayer, screeches echoing in the cavern so that it sounded like ten thousands Kobolds were chanting, “O Great Father, Lord of Crags! Titan, we summon you! Titan, we summon you! O Great Father, Lord of Crags! Titan, we summon you! Titan, we summon you!”

As they continued their chant, the rocks that surrounded her, all infused with the glowing crystals, began to glisten. She turned to them at once as they began to twitch… and then, without warning, they began to move. They rose up into the air. Everything from the largest boulder that was twice her size to the tiniest pebble the size of a toe, began to rise. Watching with wide eyes as aether began to gather and the rocks flew towards it as if drawn; she stood statue still as she watched the blinding glow of the aether as the rocks clashed together, causing the entire cavern to tremble before they seemed to melt and join together.

She gulped hard as she ducked, covering her face with her hands and arms as the stone suddenly broke apart… and there… as if hatching from an egg was a towering, hulking giant made of stone, standing above her. She slowly looked up to get good look at him.

He was taller than even Ifrit, but he was just as terrifying. Made entirely of solid rock, with a smaller sized head on the hulking muscle, where he had long white hair that hung about him, making him look all the more terrifying. But it were his bright yellow-golden eyes that looked down at her that got her attention… as if the very heart of the earth had been given life… which, now that she thought of it, was just what happened.

“He is come! He is come!” the Kobolds cried out in joy, squeaking and leaping around excitedly. “The Lord of Crags, Titan is come!”

She had hoped that when the moment came, she would be ready for this…?

That was when she heard a voice, one so deep and old that it sounded like it spoke from the very ground she stood upon.

“Overdweller…”

The earth began to tremble as the massive rocks and boulders around her began to glow a sickeningly shade of yellow, like gold shining from the rock. The entire cavern seemed to tremble as Titan’s voice spoke again, “Art thou deaf to their weeping? Thy vile kind coveteth ever the blessing of the land and murdereth my children by the score — all in service to greed. Such sins
are beyond pardon.”

Titan glared down at her, and Claire was surprised by how calm she was feeling. Normally, one would be running and screaming… but she had made her choice and it was far too late to turn back now. Well, if she was going to go down, at least she would do her best to make sure that she brought him down with her.

Yet, as Titan spoke, she found that she couldn’t disagree with what he said.

“You are not wrong,” she said calmly, not sure if Titan could even hear her voice over the loud screams of joy from the countless Kobolds, “But… I fear that your presence would only bring more harm to them.”

But it seemed that her words brought him some amusement, only more so when he saw her draw her blade, ready to strike.

“Ah…but I am not the first to suffer thy defiance. Thou didst bring Ifrit low,” the primal boomed.

It slammed its fists together, the earth beneath her feet shaking with the impact and she almost ended up falling over at the impact. But she stood her ground as he let out a roar, “Godless overdweller! Thy myriad heresies shall not go unpunished! Upon thee shall I wreak a terrible vengeance!”

She just charged ahead, and when she did, something very strange happened… it was as if she left all her fear behind. She wasn’t thinking about her odds, or how strong this foe was; for right now all that mattered was that she do her best to bring him down.

And she suddenly had another burst of insight… perhaps the Company of Heroes put her through all that fuss so that when the time came to fight Titan, she could use all that pent up frustration to bring him down.

His roars caused the entire cavern around her to tremble violently as he raised his fist up and brought it down.

She barely had time to duck and roll as he pounded the ground, sending a shockwave akin to an earthquake right at her.

“Daughter of man! Murderer of my children!” he roared as he began to stomp around and caused her to almost lose her balance before ducking under his massive fists. “I shall grind thee beneath my heel, mortal!”

Her mind remained remarkably clear as she ducked and ran, trying to avoid his attacks before he leapt up high above them to the cavern’s roof—so high that she lost sight of him for a moment. But she knew what was coming and moved as far back as she could to the edge of the platform she stood, at least far enough that she felt safe enough.

He then came flying back down, with the impact of a meteor, crashing upon the stone and cause it to crack and break beneath the power of his weight. The noise was enough to almost deafen her ears and she was sprayed with rocks and pebbles, knowing that they were going to bruise later on, and she was coughing on the dust. She gazed around to see that a good portion of the outer part of the platform they were standing on had actually fallen off, giving them a smaller platform to stand on. Had she been standing any further out, she would have probably fallen to her death.
She spit out a mouthful of blood before getting back up and running at him once more. She struck at his legs and knees as he threw his massive stone fists, causing the ground to crack and break. She knew that she was making progress though from his roars of anger.

She was like an annoying gnat that stun and bite at his ankles that he couldn’t get rid of. While she had to wonder if it hurt him, he grew more and more annoyed at this point. Finally, with another roar, he jumped up into the air once again like he did before to get away from her. But she knew what was coming this time, and held up her shield as he came crashing back down.

More of the platform cracked and broke as he roared out, coming down with the fury of a landslide.

But one advantage she had was that she was small enough to step around his attacks, even able to roll between his legs to get behind him as he sent more flying boulders at her.

This kept up for a fair amount of time before she got lucky when she found a mark. She could see it glimmering from within Titan’s chest… pulsating with aether and she knew that this had to be something akin to a heart. It wasn’t much, but it was all that she had to go on at that moment. She leapt up, and began to attack it, only to find the stone blocking her way through to his heart.

She gritted her teeth as he finally got her in her side. She hit the ground hard, skidded along the ground, and rolled back to her feet as she charged again. Oh, that was definitely going to bruise later.

She weaved in and out of his thrashing fists as she worked on trying to break through his chest. Little by little, she could feel herself breaking through. But something big was coming, she could sense it in her very blood that Titan was planning another big attack, and it was centered on the heart. She had to get through to it.

So she bashed it with her shield when she wasn’t blocking his swings: trying to chip away at the stone. With a final burst of energy, she put all her strength into the sword and rammed it through the cracking rock and ended up breaking through enough to crack the stone.

Titan howled with fury, but his limps stopped moving for a moment, as if she had just pushed a button. For a moment, she had believed she won… but it seemed to have been more of a shocked state that she had dealt to him enough of an injury to interrupt his attack.

Well, not that it stopped him from trying.

“For thee my hatred is unending, unyielding!” He roared in rage as she jumped down, the ground erupting around her. She held up her shield to cover her head as a rain of aether fell upon her.

She survived it, already up and fighting ready as he wheezed, startled at her refusal to give in.

She struck at the stone, able to reach higher and do greater damage as she leapt around his feet, feeling a surge of confidence start to magically erupt inside her.

She didn’t know how much time went by, yet not only did she not keep track, she didn’t care. She could only feel herself losing herself in this fight where her life was on the line. She suddenly felt as graceful as one of the dancing girls from Ul’dah, loving the way that she was swept up in this moment. Her mind was so blissfully clear even as Titan’s roars filled her ears.

The Company of Heroes had been determined to test her worth… well, this was exactly what she was made of.
But the high was quickly wearing off the moment she realized that Titan’s fists were becoming slower and more clumsy. She was dealing some major damage to him, and despite the pain she was feeling, she was better at bearing with it than he was.

“Tremble before the might of the earth!” the primal bellowed, raising his fists and brought it down on the ground, causing a blast of blinding energy to explode out of him with the force of a bomb, and nearly knocking her off the platform, causing her to dig her sword into the ground to keep herself from being sent flying off as he screamed, “To the last, I grapple with thee!”

She blinked, coming back to reality as she dug her heels to the dirt, sending herself flying back at him as he now tried causing the stones around her to start exploding. She could feel the blast from them as if she had been punched, but she scrambled around his craggy hide, digging her blade into his rock-like skin.

She remembered how the stones had flown up to gather around the aether when he was first created… if she could just dig her way through to the heart once more, she was sure she could dispel his aether and cause him to fall apart.

So she took her chance, when he was done with another swing, she ran up his arm and rammed her blade right into his chest. But then—to her horror—her sword stopped moving and refused to budge. Her sword was stuck. She quickly made to pull it out before Titan suddenly grabbed hold of her body and threw her away from him like a rag doll.

Claire hit the ground hard, almost knocking her out, but swung up with now only her shield left. She stared up in shock, suddenly defenseless, with her sword now embedded in his chest, around the swirling aether. Perhaps a smile passed over his face as he realized that she was now up against him with nothing more than a shield.

And so he held up his fist, and she knew that he was putting all he had left into this attack. And upon this small platform—now less than half the size it had been before—if she got hit with this there was no way that she was getting back up.

She held up her shield and defended herself, blocking it with all the strength she had left inside her. It felt as if every bone in her body was threatening to break from the impact as the shield dented and gave in. But it blocked the worst of it just long enough for her to drop and roll, getting under his reach before leaping upwards now that she was past his defenses.

With a scream, she jumped up and landed on his chest, her hands gripping the hilt of her sword, as she forced her blade through the rest of the way, and felt it slice through the pulsating heart.

He roared with agony as she pulled her blade out and fell back, landing on the ground and scrambled away, her blade suddenly feeling like a chunk of lead from how heavy it suddenly was, but there was no need to worry.

Titan staggered, his stone body crumbling as he stood. She watched as he toppled forward, his golden aether leaving his body before he roared out, “Hide, my children, into the dark! She will not be denied…”

And he finished breaking apart… the stones reduced to dust and gravels as they scattered about them.

Claire coughed, almost falling over as she stuck the tip of her sword into the ground to hold herself up like a crutch. She coughed and wheezed desperately for air as she brushed the clunks of dirt out of her hair and stared around.
The Kobolds have already fled, obeying their god’s last command, before they fled back into the tunnels of the caves. Claire felt as if she had just ran head-long into a solid stone wall. She was bruised and sore all over, having to limp over to the middle of what was left of the crumbling platform she was on… where she saw something sparkling in front of her.

She was surrounded on all sides by stones and crystals… but this one drew her attention right away due to the fact that the golden yellow crystal was identical to the other ones that she carried with her. It glinted upon the floor… where Titan had been mere moments before… and she felt herself walk over to it. She didn’t even think as she stood over it, and watched how it shimmered before it slowly rose up to meet her.

She felt the warmth of the earth pulse from it. She closed her eyes, and she could feel the life-giving energy of the earth as well as the strength of mountains. Everything faded around her as the darkness returned and she stood upon that comforting sigil. This has happened so often to her now that she didn’t even wonder of the full strangeness of the situation.

The crystal left her, joining the other crystals that surrounded her upon the sigil… where there had been three spaces before that held the others, there were just as many spaces that were empty. But that changed the moment that the golden crystal joined its fellows and an erupting pillar of earth aether burst forth. It rose up in a great pillar of light and seemed to explode above her as it sank comfortably into its spot… as if it had always been there.

Claire’s eyes opened as she felt her strength suddenly return to her and her pain faded away so that she felt nearly as good as she did before even entering these caves. She blinked, and Titan’s chambers suddenly came back to her… where she was standing upon the platform on her own.

Or maybe… not so much alone.

The other crystals she already carried were glowing from within her body… as if rejoicing the fourth that joined them. She raised a shaking hand up to her chest, feeling the warmth of the earth joining the spark of lightning, the cool breath waves of water, and the fiery heartbeat of fire that settled into her heart.

She then heard a slight applause behind her and she turned in time to see Y’shtola appearing, a wide grin on her face.

“I feared I might arrive too late,” she told her as she came up to greet her. “But I see you had the matter well in hand. I have taken measures to ensure that we are not pursued, yet I cannot say how long they will hold. Take your leave while the kobolds are still in disarray. I will follow anon. There is something I must investigate before I depart.”

“But you alright?” Claire asked tiredly, the full exhaustion of how she felt quickly settling in now that the battle was over and her adrenaline was wearing off.

But Y’shtola only smiled back as she added, without answering her question, “I will teleport you to the aetheryte in Zelma’s Run, and we will rendezvous at Camp Bronze Lake. Agreed?”

Claire nodded back wearily, watching as Y’shtola teleported away before she followed suit. By the time that she emerged from the aetheryte crystal in Zelma’s Run, the Maelstrom members who were still on guard, were staring at her with almost comically wide eyes. She just held up her hand in mild amusement as she headed back towards Camp Bronze Lake, where she gratefully took the time to rest in the soothing hot springs.

It was only afterwards as she got a good look at herself in a quiet corner of the pools, where she
was given a little privacy, did she really get a chance to examine the damage. Her entire body was covered in bruises from where she had taken the stones and boulders flying at her, and she was covered with a thick layer of dirt from the blasts that seemed to shake the very mountain they were under.

She also had cuts from where the sharp parts of the rocks went flying past her, leaving a fair amount of damage. As she leaned up against the stone wall behind her, having a handful of potion bottles to cool the dry feeling from her throat, she watched her injuries heal at a quick pace.

By the time that her body had recovered, she didn’t have an excuse to stay in the soothing waters anymore. She had cleaned up and redressed, looking sadly at her cracked sword and dented shield, before setting them aside. She would have to find a new weapon to play with until she could get a new sword.

She exited the spring just as Y’shtola arrived to greet her.

“Ah, Claire, I am relieved to see you well,” she said, sitting down next to her. “But come, let us discuss our next step. Though word will already have reached Maelstrom Command, protocol requites that a representative of our order inform the high commander of the mission’s success. The honor, of course, is rightfully yours, Claire.”

In all honesty, Claire just wanted to find a soft mattress to sleep on tonight. Despite the potion and wonderful hot springs, she still felt like she had been trapped under an avalanche and she could use a few days of rest.

Yet, she reasoned that she had to return to Limsa to take the ferry back to Vesper Bay anyway, so she could stop by the Aftcastle beforehand, maybe even grab a drink at the Drowning Wench before returning. So, she agreed, as Y’shtola smiled again, and she was starting to find her praise a little… strange. She had heard that Y’shtola didn’t give out praise easily, and so she was wondering if this was a good thing.

After promising to speak with her later, Y’shtola hired a Chocobo porter to take her directly back to Limsa Lominsa for her, and she went without any complaint.

Well, word soon spread to the rest of La Noscea that the primal Titan had been taken care of… by the time she arrived back in the city, everyone was talking about how an adventurer had been the one to take care of the threat for them. Claire couldn’t help but get the feeling that Riol had something to do about this, and shook her head as she made her way through the Aftcastle to report to the Maelstrom.

Already, word had gotten back to them so that by the time she entered, her name was on the lips of every single Maelstrom soldier. Indeed, Commander Rhiki nearly tackled her with a hug as soon as she saw her there.

“Thank you for coming, Claire! Word of your triumph reached me some while ago, but I am pleased to have it personally confirmed,” she cried out before Claire could even speak a word. “First Ifrit and now Titan… Truly, when I think of your achievements, I feel the loss of the Warriors of Light less keenly — and there can be no greater compliment than that. You and your order are heroes. The people of Limsa Lominsa are forever in your debt.”

Claire felt herself blushing as everyone was now looking at her with awe and respect in their eyes.

“Oh, oh no…” Claire said, shaking her head, “No, I’m no Warrior of Light. I was just…?”
But the Commander wasn’t even listening, telling her that she will relay the details of your report to the Admiral and that she should send her regards to the Scions.

Claire only sighed as she nodded, promising to pass those on. As Commander Rhiki ran off to pass on the news of Titan’s defeat, Claire suddenly heard a familiar, and slight annoying buzz, in her ear.

“Claire, this is Minfilia,” came the voice through the linkpearl. “Y’shtola has informed me of your success. You have won a great victory for the people of Eorzea, one that shall not be forgotten. And what is more, both you and Y’shtola emerged from O’Ghomoro unscathed. Why, Tataru and the others seemed as glad of that as they did of Titan’s fall!”

Well, she certainly hoped so for that much.

“I’m doing well, and I’ll be heading back soon,” she told her, hiding how tired she truly felt, but was still smiling in spite of herself.

Perhaps Minfilia could hear it though, because she gave a light laugh and said, “You can look forward to a hero’s welcome! We’ll be awaiting your return at the Waking Sands. There is much to discuss. Godspeed.”

Claire only nodded wearily, before remember she couldn’t see it and merely promised that she would be along as soon as possible. She had thought about waiting for Y’shtola, but she had no idea when or where she would turn up next. So, she headed out of Maelstrom command, feeling her face blushing even more so when everyone applauded like she was in the middle of a parade, and crossed over the length of the city. Not wanting to run the chance of being spotted, she pulled up the hood of brand new cloak she bought while passing through the markets. No one even glanced her way after that, and she was afforded some peace.

She doubted very much so that any of them would be able to recognize her after all that has happened, let alone be aware of the fact that she was the ‘brave, strong adventurer’ who took down the primal of earth.

Who knew soldiers were such gossipmongers?

But as she passed by the many people on her way to the docks, seeing the happy, elated expressions on their faces... it felt good. It felt really good to know that she brought those smiles to their faces. And, in spite of all the weariness she felt, she couldn't hide her own smile.

And she was still smiling even as she finally made it to the same ferry she took to get here, and bought herself a ticket to Vesper Bay.

In fact, as she watched the rolling sea along the safety of the deck of the ship, she felt that she wouldn't even mind it if they had a celebratory party in her honor when she got back. And knowing Tataru, she might just.

Of course... by the time she did finally arrive at Vesper Bay, she would have been grateful for that party. For the only thing that she found by the time she returned... was blood... and death.
(Sorry for such a long wait, but I only just realized that I now have three stories from FFXIV to take care of. So I will be doing all three stories and get them done as quickly as possible. Good news is that we are passed Titan in this story and so the next chapter here will be the aftermath of what happened at the Waking Sands. This is my Thanksgiving gift to you all, but I think that the next chapter I work on will be involving my Bringer of Nightfall story. The next chapter will be coming out as soon as possible.)

End Notes

(Ok, bet you didn’t see this thing coming at all. I had been thinking about doing this story for a long time, and never had time to sit down and do it. I know that 4.4 is coming out in about a week, but I just felt that I would have something to do when I finish writing those chapters out. Don’t worry, I will still be writing Hells Open, and Heavens Weep. This doesn’t change the story at all and I’ll be changing back and forth between stories when I get bored. This is merely the very beginning of the story of Claire Faye’s journey through Eorzea and will be heading up to just before the events of Heavensward. This will mostly be taking place from Claire’s POV, but I will switch it out from time to time. I just felt that we know how Alphinaud came to care about the WOL, but how did she fall for someone like him? Sadly, this story will not be a romance, but there will be causal flirting here and there. Anyway, let me know what you think and if you think so far! And I can’t wait to see what happens in this upcoming patch!)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!)