Reflections

by darkangelmya

Summary

All choices have repercussions. At the time, he hadn't even realized he'd made a choice, but it would change his entire future: for better or for worse.
To anyone of who had never seen it, the capital of Kimlasca-Lanvaldear was nothing short of amazing. Built within a natural crater created by a falling fonstone, the city's many levels towered above the surrounding mountains. Cobblestone streets lined the many colourful shops and the cable cars that connected the city were incredible as they zipped down their lines carrying the populace from place to place.

Yet, not a single one of these things impressed the redheaded boy who stood before the awe-inspiring heights. He watched them for but a moment, his dirty cloak billowing in the wind. Though his dress labelled him a traveller, his age left those passing by wondering where his parents were. The boy regarded their questioning stares with no more interest than he showed in Baticul's sights. None of it was important to him. The cable cars wouldn't take him where he wanted to go, and he had no use for the frivolous goods the shops were offering. All he cared about was the very top level and what he would find there. And he knew exactly what he'd find; he had 10 years of memories drawing it all out in his mind.

Racing for the lift, no one paid the 10-year old any mind, slipping on just as the machine lurched and began its ascent. He fidgeted nervously, trying to brush the dirt from his clothing, though there was nothing he could do to hide where the fabric was torn. The concern was momentary, swiftly brushed from his mind as the lift came to a stop.

The guard barely had the gate open when he bolted from the lift. Dashing up the short stairs to the stone courtyard, his gaze immediately fell upon the brilliant water fountain at its centre. The sides were lined with trees and other foliage and it all led up to the castle, the heart of Baticul, where the king and his lovely daughter lived.

Natalia...

The castle wasn't what he was looking for, not this time. Off to the left of the castle, sat a manor. It was large, even as far as manors went, but it paled in comparison to the castle in whose shadow it dwelt. It had exactly 56 bedrooms, 39 hallways, an entryway, two kitchens, a library, and drawing room that was used more as a dining room than anything else. At the center there was a courtyard lined with statues and flowers that the gardener carefully tended to each day and if you went around to the side you found an even larger yard that was lined with trees and more flowers. The manor could be considered many things, but right now, only one of them mattered.

It was home.

He raced past the guard who stood dutifully at the entrance, his crimson hair flying out behind him. The guard looked confusedly at the red blur that had just flown past but dismissed it as nothing, probably the young master in trouble with the young princess again. But... no, the guard shrugged off the half-formed thought. The lack of any decent sleep given the whole kidnapping fiasco could clearly dampen even the keenest senses. What games the imagination could play... perhaps it was time to consider a holiday.

The boy looked back over his shoulder; the guard hadn't even taken notice of him... good. He didn't care to deal with that right now. Following the sounds that came from the yard, he didn't even bother to go inside. His sword bounced against his back as he ran, painfully reminding him of the cuts and bruises that covered it. His legs echoed the pain that his back emanated, but he refused to slow down, not now. He was almost there. Everyone was worried, he had been gone too long, and he had no doubt they were all waiting for him. Their smiles, warm open arms reaching out to him...
while exuberant laughter full of relief and joy filled the air... it was a scene his mind's eye had created, the sole thought that had gotten him through these past months was finally here. They were here... they were waiting for him to come home.

When he thought back on it, he couldn't say how long he stood there. It might have been seconds, it might have been hours. Time itself became completely inconsequential standing there among the shadows of the trees that lined the courtyard. Not even a Score reading could have readied him for what he had come across when he turned that final corner.

It was him.

Only it wasn't. The boy who was sitting in the courtyard looked identical to him in almost every way. His face, his clothes... it was a mirror image that fluttered across the yard, glimmering in the sun like a reflection that danced across the water's surface. But this illusion did not vanish. Playfully chasing a butterfly as his family and a few choice servants looked on with smiles on their faces, no one had a worry in the world. The boy fell. He started to cry.

"Please don't cry Master Luke!"

He had wiped the tears from his eyes before realizing that the servants were at the other boy's side, and that their words had not been for him. How could this have happened? Why...why didn't they care? Years upon years of being told that he was special, that he was needed, it all came crashing down around him as he watched them help the boy back to his feet. The boy took a couple steps before falling again, this time into his mother's embrace.

"Honestly he's just like a baby except with a bigger body," she smiled as she pulled the boy closer and the boy smiled back.

"Yes, for him to suffer from amnesia to this extent... what he knew about being a ruler, his swordsmanship, why he doesn't even remember how to talk," her husband replied softly, with his usual emotionless façade.

"But he's safely home, isn't that all that matters?" She released her hold on the boy and he stumbled off.

"I suppose so."

The entire world froze in that moment. His mother's smile, the servants, the boy, the entire scene before him burned itself into his mind, and echoes of whispered words crept back into his ears.

_They don't need you._

"Hey Luke!" A familiar voice rose up, drowning out the whispers of the past that were haunting him. Natalia. Certainly she, if no one else would, she would notice something was amiss. She would wonder where he was and come seeking him. The bond that they shared was between them alone, and there was nothing in the world, including that boy, that could take that away from him.

"Natalia..."

"Where have you been?" she said exasperated, "I've been looking everywhere for you." The young Princess' soft smile lit up the courtyard, but that light shattered him, leaving him beclouded as she pulled out a ring of flowers, the symbol of their promise, and placed them on the other boy.

_They don't need you._
He understood now. They didn't need him. Oh sure, they liked the idea of him, but when it all came down to it, anyone who fit the description would do. It had nothing to do with him or any of his talents and abilities. The skills he had spent all these years building amounted to absolutely nothing in their eyes. Because they didn't need him.

A gentle tug on his sword derailed his train of thought. He looked over his shoulder to see the boy curiously trying to lift and examine the weapon on his back, failing to understand it was strapped on and wouldn't move very far. Panicked, he ducked behind the tree before daring to steal a glance over at the others. His parents were caught up in a conversation, apparently disagreeing over something or another; Natalia had gone off to pick some more flowers and was already in the process of lacing them together; the three maids were chatting amongst themselves, giggling about Score knows what; and the sole male servant, a blond teenage boy, sat off to the side obviously bored and staring up at the sky when not shooting a nervous glance at the three maids. No one had noticed the absence of their charge it seemed.

The other boy tried to follow him around the tree but tripped over one of the roots that was protruding from the ground. Instinctively, he reached out and caught the boy by the arm. Their eyes met.

It was like looking into a mirror.

The boy that stood before him was his height and his size. They had the same long red hair and even the same emerald eyes. No. They didn't have the same eyes. The eyes that looked back at him sparkled with a childish curiosity and hopefulness, oblivious to the pain and harsh realities of the world, something he had recently become all too familiar with. He could just imagine what this boy saw in him. Suffering, betrayal, hopelessness, sorrow, a myriad of emotions that were suffocating him, smothering him until all that remained was a shadow of the bright, ambitious person he had once been.

The boy looked at him, almost as if contemplating who he was. The question in this stranger's eyes was obvious: who could he be, looking like he did, identical to the boy's own reflection? But the problem faded as quickly as the unspoken query had come, leaving an innocent smile in its stead. The matter was inconsequential to this person who had taken his place. It was a frozen moment, neither he nor the boy said a word... yet somehow, such a thing was unnecessary.

After a moment of thought, the boy took the ring of flowers off. That sweet smile never leaving his face, the blossoms were carefully placed over him, their white petals mingling with his crimson hair. He felt his tears return.

The boy's hand was soft and warm as it sat on his cheek, feeling tears that were impossible to understand. His reflection looked at him and his tears, not knowing what they were or why they were there. Only knowing that because there were tears, there must also be pain, and pain... hurt. Gathering his remaining strength, he gently placed his hand over the boy's. His once proud voice came out sad and broken.

"Hello... Luke."

Luke continued to look at him for a moment, pondering the situation, but before he could do anything, Luke had stepped closer and he found himself trapped in a soft embrace. He tensed at first completely caught in Luke's unexpected gesture, but then he slowly relaxed and all the pain that he had tried to force away took over. He hesitantly returned Luke's gesture, allowing the warmth to slowly wash all the wretchedness away. He held his reflection for all that it was worth as his tears continued to silently flow.
There was pain, and the pain had to go away. When there was pain, people did this, and it went away. Special people did this and all the pain always went away.

"Family..." he answered gently.

Family did this, and it all went away.

"Master Luke? Master Lu-" The maid froze at the sight she stumbled upon. They had finally noticed his absence and she had wandered over to see what the young master was so interested in. She had no idea.

He looked up at her and Luke turned around, almost tripping over his own feet in the process. He caught Luke before he fell and steadied him on his feet. The maid muttered something that Luke certainly shouldn't be hearing at his age...well his mental state, and ran off to go get the others. Honestly, she should know to watch her tongue around children, much less her master. Well, he couldn't entirely blame her; it was a rather...unique situation. What a fine mess this was becoming.

Still clinging to his sleeve and trying to steady himself, Luke met his gaze and smiled, that same heart-warming, innocent smile, and he couldn't help but smile back. Luke really was a big baby. In that last moment, he debated leaving. It was obvious to him that everyone was doing just fine without him. No one had even noticed he was missing, no had even suspected anything was amiss. He could completely vanish with none the wiser, leaving only a confused boy and a maid who'd seen too much sun in his wake, the only testimony to his existence. He couldn't go back to his old life, that life died the day he was taken away. There wasn't room in the world for two Luke fon Fabres.

He wiped away his tears, the last tears he would let himself shed. It would be a new beginning. With a deep sigh, he gathered what remained of his shattered will and turned his back on all that he loved.

Luke grabbed his sleeve again. Luke didn't want him to leave. He didn't want to leave either, not really. But what was left for him here? Nothing. No one here needed him; no one here wanted him. There was no point in staying where there was no longer a place for him. He looked Luke in the eyes, silently pleading him to let go, but Luke only clutched his sleeve tighter. And then it clicked.

Luke wanted him to stay.

Him and him alone.

There were no complex feelings, no ulterior motives, no reasoning whatsoever in Luke's actions. His feelings were so completely and utterly simple and for whatever the reason was, they were as plain as day to him. His leaving caused Luke pain, and Luke didn't want that. He was someone special. Special people didn't go away.

Family

Yes...Family.

And then the chance of leaving was gone forever.


It had been the blond, Guy, who got there first. He too froze at what he saw. T-Two of them? It was as if Luke were standing next to a frameless mirror. They were identical, completely and utterly identical, except for the clothes they were wearing but it wasn't like that made any kind of
difference. More of the staff had begun to gather around, interested in the source of the commotion. The boys both took an uncomfortable step back. Damn, they even moved the same way.

"What is going on over here? Back to your allotted tasks!" The Duke's voice commanded over the crowd. Luke shrunk back at the commanding voice of their father and inched closer to him. He didn't blame Luke. That voice had the ability to scare off armies. The small crowd immediately dispersed until only the Duke, his wife, the young princess, and a few choice servants remained.

"L-Luke?" Susanne muttered hesitantly. Luke poked his head out from where he had been hiding behind his counterpart.

"Damn," Guy muttered to himself. He still couldn't get over the resemblance. It took him few minutes and even then there were no more than a couple very small differences between the two boys that stood before them, barely enough to distinguish the two. The one that they had been looking after had hair that was a few shades lighter and that almost had a golden hue when the sun shone on it, while the other one had hair that was pure crimson, a difference that would have gone completely unnoticed unless the two stood side by side. The other one wore clothes that were tattered and torn though they had clearly once been fine. Dirt camouflaged the countless bruises and cuts that covered him and it was plain as day that he was very uncomfortable in front of his onlookers.

There was no doubt in Guy's mind that this other boy was in fact the real Luke fon Fabre. Guy had spent enough time watching him to be sure of that. There was no mistaking the aura enveloping him. The look on his face, his piercing cold eyes... there was absolutely no doubt. He wasn't the bright ray of sunshine his counterpart was... no this boy was a lonely winter night, frigid and cut off from the world. He was different than he had been before though, he was sadder somehow, and knowing this only drove home the horrid conclusion that was slowly creeping its way into his mind. Could he have actually gone through it?

"Goodness! They're identical!" One of the maids finally exclaimed after moments of tense silence.

"Yeah," Guy agreed softly to himself. "He could almost be a replica."

"Replica?" Susanne queried softly turning towards Guy, "Do you know something of this?"

Guy cursed at himself for being so careless. This was the last thing he wanted to bring into an already precarious situation. "No...it's nothing." Guy managed to mumble.

"If there is anything you know about this you will tell me at once!" The Duke's angry voice echoed across the silent yard. Guy cringed.

"I apologize Your Grace," Guy said through gritted teeth, "I was just thinking of something an old friend told me about once. It just seemed too farfetched and I did not want to worry Your Grace with such wild speculations." Guy painfully bit back the words he would have liked to tack on to the end of that statement. Now wasn't the time or the place for pettiness.

"Please." The lady of the house knelt down so she could look the young teen in the eye, smiling gently. "If you have any ideas, no matter how farfetched, please share them."

Guy stood firm for about half a second but any shred of determination he'd mustered shattered under the Lady's gentle gaze. No one could say no to her smile. If she smiled and asked someone to jump off the castle roof, they'd probably do it. He let out a defeated sigh before hesitantly beginning his explanation.
"It's a story someone told me when I was younger, about a technology that could replicate things using fonons. But when they realized it could be used on living things, it was supposedly banned."

Duke Fabre was good at many things, however, controlling his emotions was not one of them. Unfortunately for the young blond servant, he was the easy target of the Duke's growing frustration.

"Just what exactly are you implying? And do remember exactly who we are speaking of! I'm not going to stand here as you insinuate that someone has been using fomicry on my son!"

Fomicry. He had never heard of any such thing before and made a mental note to look it up at the first given opportunity. His father obviously knew, or had at least heard of the technology in question; else he certainly wouldn't be so outraged. Or know its name. That was so like Father. He almost felt bad for Guy. Almost.

"But Dear," Susanne interjected, still sitting at Guy's eye level. "Certainly you can't deny the possibility." She looked at the two boys. Even she could scantily tell them apart. "If our enemies indeed had access to such a technology, wouldn't they-" her thoughts followed through to the inevitable conclusion of her idea and she was unable to finish.

"L-Luke?" Susanne called, on the verge of tears, obviously referring to him. He waited a moment before hesitantly shaking his head. He wasn't their Luke anymore. They had taken their Luke back; it was someone he could no longer be.

"Enough of this nonsense!" Duke Fabre took control of the situation. "You are my son, are you not?" He returned his father's gaze but offered no response. "Good then," his father said decisively, the lack of response apparently good enough for him. "Then what are we doing with that atrocious thing?" He demanded, his finger pointed straight at Luke.

"What?" The Duke's statement drew Guy's attention away from the hatred he had been focusing onto seven very specific blades of grass to keep him from doing something he'd regret. How could he say such a thing? Five minutes ago that boy had been his son! Now he was going to take him out with the rest of the garbage? Fortunately, it seemed Susanne shared his outrage at the statement. She had stood up and was ready to intervene, but as they watched the scene play out before them, they relaxed. Luke, it seemed, had an unexpected defender.

He had taken Luke's arm and pulled it behind him, adopting a somewhat defensive stance in front of his counterpart. His hesitant look had become a determined glare, matching the intensity of his father's. The message was very clear; he wasn't letting anyone so much as lay a finger on Luke.

He surprised himself by how quickly and how naturally he came to Luke's defence. Exactly why, he would never know. Perhaps it was because Luke was the last thing he had that gave his own existence any meaning whatsoever, or perhaps it was just that Luke seemed so utterly defenceless, or maybe even just because Luke was someone special.

_Family._

Duke Fabre let out an exasperated sigh. "So what do you suggest we do? We can't have two Lukes running all over the place."

"Don't be silly dear," Susanne said softly as she came up and placed her arm around her husband's with a smile. "You heard him before, he isn't Luke."

"Well then who is he?" Duke Fabre's voice was escalating along with his frustration.
"A-" The sound echoed as everyone fell silent and their attention all turned to its source. Luke hesitantly stepped back at the sudden focus of attention on him.


Luke contemplated it for a moment. "A-" but stopped, letting out a small sigh, obviously unable to come up with whatever sound he wanted to.

"Oh well," Guy ruffled Luke's hair playfully. "I guess we'll never know."

"No."

Guy jumped at the unexpected voice that sounded behind him. For whatever reason, he never expected the brat to talk. He hadn't said a word since they stumbled upon the two of them. But he completely ignored Guy and went straight to Luke.

"Say it," he said forcibly.

"Oh come on, go easy on him, he doesn't know how to talk yet," Guy finally managed to get out.

He ignored Guy rambling behind him, this time looking Luke right in the eye. "Say it."


"A...se"

"A...the"

"A..." Luke gave up and folded his arms and put on a pout, obviously unable to produce the right sounds. He smiled, then couldn't resist a small laugh. That was the saddest attempt at saying 'family' he had ever heard. Yet somehow he knew that had been what Luke wanted to say. It gave him an idea... and he liked it.

"Asch," he declared, stringing together the sounds Luke had produced and turning to face his parents. He liked it; it had certain degree of irony to it. He was once Luke, 'the light of the sacred flame,' now he was its ashes.

Luke smiled as he grabbed Asch's hand. "A-the" he said with a big grin before running up to his mother, who was now smiling back at him, at them both.

"Well then," Susanne said gently, "I think that's more than enough excitement for one day, wouldn't you agree?" She smiled at Luke and he smiled back. She gently took Luke's hand. "There is much to do now, shall we head inside?" Luke answered with a fervent nod. "Are you coming... Asch?"

The name seemed so foreign as it escaped her lips and she was hesitant to use it, but the grateful smile that her son gave her at the sound of the name he'd chosen, of his name, was more than enough to reassure her.

Asch slowly shook his head. He wasn't going inside just yet. For a moment, a horrible idea grazed her thoughts. What if he was planning to leave? Her worries proved groundless though, as she watched him steal occasional glances at Natalia. Goodness! She had completely forgotten the young princess was even there. She was off to the side, standing with her toes pointed inwards,
nervously clutching her hands, and appeared to be very interested in the four leaves that were on the ground by her feet. Susanne simply smiled, and quietly led Luke and the rest of the crowd away. She would leave them be.

Leave it to Mother. Asch watched her leave and take the crowd with her. As much as she intended well, he was rather reluctant to be left alone with Natalia. He knew he would have to confront her eventually, and while now should be as good a time as any, the pain was too close to the surface, and he didn't have the strength to deal with it now, not mentally, not emotionally.

"L-Luke?" Natalia uttered after seconds of tense silence. She waited a moment, but she got no response. He was looking off in the distance at the other boy, the one who looked so much like him. She had listened to the others talking. She wasn't quite sure she understood it all, but this was the real Luke... wasn't it? It was her Luke, wasn't it? The one with whom she had shared so many wonderful moments, the one who made her that promise... it was him... wasn't it?

"Luke?" Still no answer.

"Luke!" She finally said loudly in a very put-on manner. She would never forget the look that he gave her. It was cold, lined with sorrow and a pain that plunged without end into the very depths of his soul. He said nothing as he slowly shook his head. She saw what she thought was the glisten of a tear, but he looked away before she could be sure.

No. He was her Luke and she wasn't going to give up on him so easily. She wasn't going to let him slip away, not like this. "Luke!" she repeated again, but he wouldn't answer. He had heard her, but he wouldn't answer her. She tried putting herself in front of him, where he wouldn't be able to easily avert her gaze, but still he wouldn't even look her in the eyes.

He couldn't do it. Natalia was standing right there but he couldn't bring himself to face her. Watching Luke stumble around the other end of the courtyard was all that was keeping him from taking off. He couldn't handle this, he just wasn't ready yet. He refused to answer to Natalia, so long as she called him 'Luke'. He wasn't going to answer to Luke anymore. It wasn't him, and he wasn't going to pretend. He just wanted, more than anything, for her to accept him, to accept him for who he was. He wanted her to accept Asch, but perhaps he was deluding himself after all.

Natalia took off, returning to the castle in tears. Asch stood alone, feeling horrible. He should have said something to her, but it was just too hard. He knew it wasn't her fault, but that didn't make things any easier, it still hurt. He would make it up to her someday, once the pain wasn't so close to the surface. He would make amends, and he would see her smile again.

"Asch is it? A fitting name." A voice came from the shadows. Asch didn't need to turn around to know who it was. He would be a long time before he ever forgot the voice whose whispers still haunted him. "Look at them," the voice continued "they didn't even notice you were missing. Had they not seen you, they never would have known. And even now, some of them won't even acknowledge you." Asch was silent. "I'm sorry I had to do this, but you needed to see for yourself the lies that these people have fed you for so many years. They told you that you were special, that you were needed, and yet they didn't even notice that you were gone. But it's different for me. I need you, and only you. If it wasn't you, it just wouldn't be right. Won't you consider coming with me? We'll make a place in the world for you alone, away from this void where no one wants or needs you."

"...you're wrong."

"What?" the voice said, completely caught off guard by Asch's response. That wasn't part of the plan. He hadn't taken this possibility into account.
"You're wrong," Asch said simply. "Even if everyone else here replaced me, there's still one person who needs me and only me."

And with that last sentence, Asch walked off before the person in the shadows could say another word.

*Family.*

*Yes...family.*
To Begin Anew

ND2000 In Kimlasca shall be born one who inherits the power of Lorelei. He will be a boy of royal blood with hair of red. He shall be called 'The light of the sacred flame' and he will lead Kimlasca-Lanvaldear to new prosperity.

The fonstones glistened in the sky as they reflected the afternoon sun onto the manor's residents. Luke fon Fabre watched these fonstones lazily from his bedroom window as the warm summer breeze drifted in, bringing with it the silence that seemed to echo throughout the courtyard. It looked like it would be another boring day at the manor.

But it was always a boring day at the manor. With the castle just next door, anything of any potential interest whatsoever happened there. Not that events at the castle were usually interesting; most were boring. In fact, most were very boring. For the most part, he'd much rather sit around and do nothing at the manor all day then sit through another family history lecture in the castle library.

Maybe he could talk Guy into going out, though he doubted there would be much more to do in Baticul. Despite the city's bustling streets, there wasn't much happening outside of the usual daily comings and goings. Many of the city's residents were friendly and those that weren't so stiff and formal around him were fun to talk with but those people were quickly becoming fewer and further between, making his all too rare excursions less and less interesting.

Luke was forbidden to leave the manor. That was unless of course someone went with him, be it his servant Guy, or some of the White Knights, his family's personal guard. Much to Luke's constant dismay, the guard were all a task-oriented bunch; they wanted him to get done what he needed done and head right back to the manor. Exploring and simply hanging out on the streets watching people come and go was never looked kindly upon, and though they didn't dare say anything, the impatient aura they emitted just left Luke wanting to go back home.

Of course, there was no way he'd be allowed outside the city. That suited him fine though; he doubted anything outside Baticul was all that interesting either, but then again, a change of scenery never hurt anyone. At the very least then he could avoid getting caught up in another of Natalia's 'projects'. That girl never let up, and constantly insisted on dragging him along for the ride. While even he couldn't deny the results the Princess' ceaseless efforts produced, it was still total pain in the meantime.

"Useless as ever I see." Luke heard an all too familiar voice coming from behind him.

"Good morning Asch," Luke responded sarcastically, not even turning to see his unexpected visitor.

"It's not morning, it's afternoon idiot," Asch shot back.

"Right, right, and what drags you all the way over here?" Keeping up his overly annoyed tone, Luke turned around to see his counterpart leaning against the doorway. He vaguely wondered what was up. It wasn't too often Asch came up to his room.

Asch rolled his eyes at Luke's tone. He couldn't deny taking a small amount of pleasure at it. Luke seemed to excel at finding ways to try his patience, so a little payback every now and again was most welcome. Not that he's ever let Luke know that. Their eyes met and they shared a mutual grin.
Asch took a moment to glance around the room, it had been awhile since he'd come up here. It was always Luke knocking on his door looking for something or another, or they'd be out in the city or even up at the castle, so he never really had any need to come up here. The room was small and a bit cramped but it was bright at this time of day with the sun shining in through a couple of large windows on the far wall. The bed up against the wall was made, but the shelves were cluttered and disorganized and various books littered the floor. Luke's sword hung from a hook in the wall next to the window while several older ones were scattered around the room. It was messy, but it wasn't unexpected from Luke.

"We're to be present in the drawing room in about five minutes." Asch finally stated.

"Oh? What's going on this time?"

"Not sure. I didn't get any details, I was just told we were to show up, so I thought I'd be courteous and come drop off the message myself."

"Right," Luke replied sarcastically, unable to keep the playful smile off his face. "You just came up here so you could bug me and we both know it."

"Well, whatever." Asch shrugged off the accusation. "Just make sure you're there on time. I'm heading over right now."

"Well then just wait a second!" Luke whined, earning him a rather mordacious look from Asch. Asch didn't put up with Luke's pointless whining it in the least. Luke shrunk back from that glare before resuming in as plain a tone as he could manage, "I-I'll come with you. It's not like I'm doing anything anyways." Damn it! Asch could be downright scary when he wanted to be.

Luke snatched the sword from its hook but hadn't even made it halfway to the door before a head-splitting pain brought him to his knees.

...fragments...my soul...heed... voice

"Are you alright?" Luke heard Asch say, his voice a comforting warmth amidst the searing pain that was his head at the moment.

"Yeah...about as fine as you are."

"Real funny."

Luke didn't need to look up to know that Asch was in as much pain as he was. They had both been having these so-called 'headaches' since before he could remember, which he reluctantly had to admit was only about the past seven years. Whether or not they had persisted longer than that, he honestly couldn't say. Their parents had dragged them both to every doctor in Baticul, but not one of them could figure out what caused them. It was a mystery to everyone. They shared the same pain, and always at the exact same time. They didn't understand it, but it was still something they shared in, be it willingly or not.

"Hey Luke, are you alright?" Guy's concerned voice came from the back of the room. "Is it another one of those headaches again?

"Yeah." Luke stood up slowly, the splitting pain now reduced to a dull throb. "But it's gone now."

"You weren't hearing things again were you?" Guy inquired worryingly. It was bad enough Luke got those crazy headaches, but to be hearing voices? It ratted his nerves more than he cared to admit. It wasn't something Luke discussed with others, outside of himself, and of course Asch. As
far as Guy could tell, Luke had never even told the Duke or Lady.

"Yeah..." Luke replied as he steadied himself using the bedpost. "Something about fragments and souls... and-"

"And heeding voices," Asch finished Luke's sentence, confirming that they had heard the same thing. Guy just about jumped two feet in the air at the voice that came from behind him.

"A-Asch," Guy choked still catching his breath. Damn it, he hadn't even noticed him. "I- I didn't see you there."

"I figured that much from the way you just hit the roof," Asch said scathingly. "And while you're at it, care to explain why you're sneaking in the window?"

Damn. Leave it to Asch to actually be paying attention to that while he was in pain. "Ah well that's- you see- umm..." Guy was never particularly good at coming up with stuff on the spot, and Asch's talent at putting people under pressure with that look of his, wasn't helping.

"Come on Asch, cut him some slack," Luke spoke up in his best friend's defence. "You know he hangs out with me, and you know how fussy Father is about us 'fraternizing' with the servants."

Asch couldn't deny that fact. Their father was always particularly stringent about who his sons associated with. Not that he seemed to care about much else. He also couldn't deny the friendship between Luke and Guy. Himself excluded, Guy had almost raised Luke single-handedly. Their father was always busy, and never seemed to want anything to do with either of them while their mother was often tied up in social events, if she wasn't ill and in bed. She tried her best to spend time with them, but she never had much of it.

"Just use the door next time," Asch finally answered.

"Come to think of it, just why are you here Asch? You and Luke going to go do some training or something?" Guy inquired finally noticing the oddity of finding Asch hanging out in Luke's room. Given how small Luke's room was, when the two did something together, they would almost always take over one of the larger common areas.

"Something or another in the drawing room," Luke supplied not waiting for Asch to offer an answer. For some reason Guy and Asch never got along very well. They were a lot better now than what Luke remembered of when they were younger though. There was a time when they couldn't even be in the same room together. Still, Luke would rather not give either of them any unnecessary opportunities.

"Yes, and now we're going to be late. Are you coming or not?" Asch asked, clearly starting to get annoyed.

"I see he's as impatient as ever," Guy muttered sourly just loud enough for Luke to hear. Luke responded with an elbow in Guy's side. "Hey! What was that for?" Guy demanded indignantly. Luke ducked out of reach of Guy's answering swing, moving to follow his counterpart that had already decided to leave. Asch was nothing if not abhorredly punctual. Guy would often say that he had a type A personality when Asch was out of earshot, Luke wasn't entirely sure what that meant but the way Guy said it made Luke think it wasn't good. Whatever it was, Asch definitely liked having everything in order and on time. Luke had definitely learned that the hard way.

"Hey Guy! If you're not busy after all this you want to get some training in?" Luke called back waving his sheathed blade in the air.
"Sure." Guy waved back, watching Luke grin as he took off after Asch. Such an idiot. Guy knew full well that he'd be busy with chores later, but he would make a point to get out of it. As his attendant, taking care of Luke, and technically Asch as well, was his duty first and foremost. Asch had always been the independent one though, and never cared to have someone help him with anything he could do on his own. Not to mention he and Asch just didn't get along. At all. They each had their reasons, but Luke hated it and had made it his personal mission to turn the two of them into friends. While his attempts had been intolerably annoying at best, they had some degree of success. The two had started pretending just to get him to stop.

"Would it kill you to slow down every once in awhile?" Luke managed through breaths once he had caught up to Asch.


"Hey!" The indignant response came as expected, "I do so get exercise!"

"Following Pere around the courtyard as he tends to the flowers doesn't count, idiot." Asch opened the door on the western edge of the courtyard and allowed Luke to enter before following him in.

"I do more than-"

"Okay okay whatever, we're already late so just shut up and walk already." Asch cut their argument short when Luke had stopped in his tracks to protest.

"Guy's right, you are so impatient." Luke mumbled to himself as he opened the door to the drawing room, letting Asch go in as he followed behind.

The drawing room was a grand room with a large vaulted ceiling. Marble pillars lined the room creating a small hallway from which the guards dutifully watched the comings and goings. At the center a long table sat under a large chandelier that illuminated the room when the light from the windows didn't suffice. At the head of the table sat Duke Fabre, to his right sat the Lady of the house, and today, on his left sat the manor's unexpected guest.

"So how are the twins doing?"

"We're doing fine, thank you," Asch replied, simultaneously answering the question and announcing their presence.

"Master Van!" Luke's exuberant cry almost echoed in the large room. "What are you doing here? I didn't think today was a training day."

"It isn't," Van replied with a bit of a chuckle at his student's enthusiasm. "I'm here on more urgent business today." The man in the drawing room sat back in his chair, a hand on his tan coloured goatee as he contemplated something or another, still sparing a smile for his eager student. His matching tan hair was neatly bound up on his head while his carefully groomed uniform left nothing out of place. His posture as he returned his attention to the Duke and Lady gave him presence and authority even among those who outranked him.

"There you boys are," their mother stated with about as much discontent as she could muster. It was far too difficult to be upset with those two. She was always just so happy to have them there. They'd both grown into such handsome young men, though some days she still had a difficult time telling them apart.
"Take a seat you two," their father said sternly and Asch took his spot next to their mother, while Luke quickly snatched the spot next to Van. Once they had both settled, he motioned for Van to begin.

"I will be returning to Daath tomorrow. It seems that Fon Master Ion has gone missing."

"What?" Asch stood up in outrage, his chair scrapping against the floor, nearly falling over from the sudden gesture. "Fon Master Ion is missing?"

"Calm down Asch," Van said calmly. "It's not certain that this was an act of aggression or anything of the sort. Rather, no details have been issued to any of the divisions whatsoever, which suggests a more non-malicious cause. For now it is simply a summon to Daath to organize a search."

"Then I'll come with you! There has to be something I can do to help."

"Don't be so rash. You and I both know that isn't an option for you."

Asch bit his lip and sat back down, knowing all too well the truth behind Van's statement. He wasn't exactly free to come and go as he pleased. He had his position and rank to consider.

Luke could only listen and watch as the conversation carried out in front of him. It had long since gone leagues beyond his ability to understand or follow. What was going on that had Asch so worked up? He didn't get any of it, and as usual, no one bothered to slow down so he could understand.

"What exactly is Fon Master Ion?" Luke finally gave into his growing curiosity and annoyance at being the only one left out; his question breaking the tense silence. It succeeded only in earning him a rather loud and irritated scowl from Asch as he crossed his arms and shook his head.

"I swear you and I are not related," Asch said with an exasperated sigh. "First of all, it's 'who' not 'what'. Secondly, you cannot seriously tell me you have no idea who the Fon Master is! He's the leader of the order of Lorelei! It's thanks to him that there's peace between our kingdom of Kimlasca and the Malkuth empire! You know that!" Asch collapsed back into his chair, frustrated to the point of defeat. Luke was such a hopeless case.

"Yes. Ion's predecessor Evenos was the hero who ended the Hod war, so Fon Master Ion is a representative of the peace that reigns today," Van added. Luke simply sighed; once again, the conversation had become completely beyond him.

"So Master Van, since you're here, will we get a chance to do any training?"

"Luke!" Their father's angry voice made Luke shrink back in his chair. "Dorian General Grants has urgent business to attend to! It's about time you learned some respect!"

"It's alright." Asch stood up drawing the pressure away from his little brother. "I'll go report to Uncle."

"Ah, thank you Asch. I haven't had a chance to speak with His Majesty yet. If you're willing to do that for me, I might have some time to spare for some extra training," Van replied gratefully.

"All right!" Luke almost jumped up out of his chair.

"Well, I'll just be off then. I shouldn't be gone too long." Asch announced, pushing in his chair.

"Alright dear," Susanne said softly. "Have a safe trip."
"I'm only going to the castle, Mother."

"I know, but do be careful anyways."

"I will." Asch sighed, unable to resist a small smile once his back was turned.

"I'll see you off!" Luke offered eagerly.

"Honestly you guys, it's just next door! It's not like I'm going off to explore the world!"

"Well I'm going to anyways."

"I'll wait out in the courtyard then," Van replied as he too got up out of his seat. "Come and meet me when you're ready." With a courteous bow to the Duke and his Lady, he exited the room.

"I can find the door on my own, you know," Asch told Luke who had followed him out of the drawing room.

"I know, but I felt like it anyways. Hey, why don't you come train with us? You can always go see Uncle later."

"No, its best I go now and get it over and done with."

"Awww, come on. Why not?"

"Because," Asch said as he tossed his sword over his shoulder, "I don't need the practice. You do."

"Right. This coming from the one who used to haul me out of bed at the crack of dawn because he wanted more practice. Come on," Luke whined, "just come train with us."

"Just get yourself to the courtyard before Van gives up on you."

"Fine, we'll just see how smug you are when I get better than you."

"Don't aim for the impossible."

"Yeah sure, well don't let Natalia hold you up too long this time," Luke said tauntingly, rewarded when Asch turned several shades redder, though whether it was out of embarrassment or anger, he couldn't be sure. Luke had decided long ago he'd rather not know if his implications remotely hit the mark. What they did on their own time was their business, and he was perfectly happy not knowing the details.

"Hey," Luke spoke up as Asch was halfway out the door, "Be careful."

"That goes double for you," Asch shot back with a smile. "I'll see you later."

"Later." The large double doors closed and the younger Fabre began to make his way to the courtyard.

"Young Master," a voice came from the other side of the room.

"What is it? And stop it with the whole 'young' thing!" Luke snapped back at Ramdas, who was now making his way over to where Luke was standing.

"My apologies, but until you come of age in three years, I will still refer to you as 'Young Master.'"
"You don't call Asch 'Young Master'" Luke shot back getting more bitter by the second. While he certainly was the youngest member of the household, he hated how everyone took every possible opportunity to remind him of it. Of course that wasn't the only reason...

"Ah yes...well that's because-"

"Yes I know!" Luke angrily cut him off. Asch's rank was the last thing he cared to be reminded of at the moment. "Is there anything you actually want?"

"Please stop fraternizing with that gardener, Pere. It isn't fit for someone of your station."

Luke bit his lip, it probably wasn't 'fit for someone of his station' to bite the butler's head off, not that it changed how much he'd have loved to do it. Some sword training would do him some good, at the very least he could vent some of his stress. "Stop telling me what to do." Luke answered, punctuating his point by slamming the door behind him as he continued on to the courtyard. It was so stupid! They hardly let him do anything! He wasn't allowed to go out unless someone went with him, and now he wasn't supposed to talk to the few people inside that were actually nice to him. So what exactly was 'one of his station' supposed to do?

"-that time is going to be coming up soon isn't it?" Guy's voice broke Luke away from his snowballing frustration and bitterness. It was coming from the center of the courtyard where he was standing with Master Van. But what was Guy...? Luke moved a bit closer.

"It is, but I wouldn't worry just yet. As long as things-"

"Ah Master Luke! Good day!" One of the servants passing through the courtyard stopped to greet him before continuing on their way. Both Van and Guy stopped their discussion and turned towards him. Not much point in hoping to hear the rest of the conversation now.

"Hey Guy, what's up?" Luke inquired, knowing full well he probably wouldn't get the answer he was looking for.

"Well I thought I'd wait for you here, and then Van showed up. I didn't think it was a training day, so I was asking Van if he'd give me some instruction. He is a master swordsman after all."

"Really? Huh." Luke dropped the issue. It never ceased to amaze him that Guy couldn't tell Luke knew he was lying. That or he knew but chose to lie anyways. Either way, pushing it any further would only get Guy mad at him, and he still wouldn't get any answers.

"Yeah, but since you're here, I'll think I'll just watch for now. Give it all you got." Guy gave Luke a playful punch in the arm and took a seat in one of the many benches that lined the edge of the courtyard.

Luke rubbed his arm here Guy had hit him and plopped himself down the edge of one of the flower beds, careful not to crush any of the flowers, and simply watched as Van proceeded with preparations for his lesson.

"So you have to go look for this 'Fon Master Ion' because you're a member of the Order of Lorelei?" Luke asked as Van set up various dummies that they would be using in their training session.

"That's right." Van replied as he made the last few adjustments.

"So how long will you be gone then?"
"I can't be sure. Why do you ask?"

"No reason really..."

"Don't worry," Van said with a chuckle, easily guessing his student's concern. "I'll send one of my men here to help with your training until I get back."

"That's okay; it's really not the same without you training me anyways. I'll manage while you're gone."

"You and Asch do a lot of training together don't you?"

"Well yeah, but it's not the same as my training with you. Asch never goes easy on me. He just beats me again and again and it's so annoying. It wouldn't kill him to cut me a break."

"In a true battle, your enemy will not go easy on you. It may just be his way of trying to show you what a battle is really like. Not that there will likely ever be a need for you to actually fight." Van stood up finally done setting up. "There. We're ready to begin. Luke?"

But Luke didn't hear Van's words. Something was...coming. A strange yet vaguely familiar feeling seemed to fill the air of the manor; it was like a warm flow surrounded him, but the afternoon air was still. It was coming from everywhere and nowhere all at once. The world around him dissolved, and all he could hear was the flow of something, somewhere, and whatever it was, it was coming closer.

"Luke!"

"Huh?" Luke looked around confused for a moment. "Oh! Sorry!" Luke quickly took his place as Van patiently watched him from across the courtyard. What had the boy so distracted all of a sudden?

"Now, today-" Van's instructions were cut short by a voice that echoed across the courtyard. The melody it carried soft and entrancing, inviting all those listening to simply lay down and rest. Even Guy who was off along the edge of the courtyard was struggling to stay standing, and Van could distinctly feel his own energy drain from him. There was only one person who could do this to him.

"I've finally found you Vandesdelca!"

Something was wrong. Asch didn't know what it was, but something just didn't feel right. There was no sense of fear or danger, at least not so far as he could tell, but there was something there, and it shouldn't be. Fonons. There were fonons everywhere, they were all around him. No. Not here. Not around him. Asch's mild concern quickly became a distressing sense of urgency. He had to get back, and the sooner the better.

"Asch? Where are you going?" His uncle called to him.

"Sorry Uncle!" Asch called back. "I have to get home right away! Tell Natalia I'll stop by later!" And he was gone without another wasted moment. He needed to get back, and that idiot had better be okay.

Luke looked up at the source of the voice, but he had barely located it before it vanished again, the brown blur moving from the roof to the courtyard, with tan hair flowing behind her, a glint
catching his eye as her knife reflected the sun.

"Prepare to die traitor!" she cried, and Van barely got his sword up in time to block her strike, but she wasted no time in dodging his counter and getting in behind him.

"Tear...I knew it."

"Who are you?" Luke demanded, his sword swinging down on the unknown enemy without even waiting for a response.

She easily spun around, bringing her staff up to meet his blow, but as soon as their weapons touched, a bright light enveloped them and Luke was consumed by the agony of an all too familiar head-splitting pain.

*Resound...the will of Lorelei shall reach you...and open the way.*

"It's that damn voice again..." Luke managed through the pain. Why here? Why now of all times?

"The Seventh Fonon?" The girl exclaimed in shock at the mass of fonons that was now engulfing them.

"Luke!" Asch dashed across the courtyard, nearly losing his arm when Van grabbed him and hauled him back. "Let go!"

"No!" Van snatched the boy before he could get any closer. The last thing they needed was Asch to get caught up in and compound the mess in which his younger sibling was already entangled.

Asch desperately tried to free himself from Van's grip, but his hold was firm. Asch continued to struggle regardless; he couldn't just do nothing! This was Luke. Sure he was annoying, and nosy and whined all the time. But he was still Luke! The one that used to crawl into his bed every time he had a bad dream; the one Asch could always count on to have a smile; the one that no matter was going on, would drop everything just to spend some time together, the only one to see him, to acknowledge him... Luke was his little brother; it was Asch's job to protect him!

The light in the center of the courtyard completely engulfed the would-be-assassin and his brother alike before vanishing altogether, dispersing into fonons that glittered in the afternoon light. But the two in the center of it all were no longer there.

Luke was gone.
"Luke... was it?" The girl asked gently as she knelt beside the redhead that was still asleep among the flowers in which she herself had awoken only moments ago. She brushed some of his hair out of his face. It was long and was a gorgeous shade of red tinted with an almost golden hue. The gold lining of his jacket almost glowed against the white cloth in the moonlight. The short sleeves and open belly probably didn't keep him very warm though. Not that he seemed to mind at the moment.

He was sound asleep. At least, she hoped he was asleep. Better asleep than unconscious. Not that she couldn't handle either case, but unconscious required healing and healing required energy. Energy she'd rather not have to expend at the moment, especially since she had no idea where they had been blown to, and just how far from any feasible respite they may be. Regardless, he would have to get up soon.

"Luke?" She repeated, louder this time. This time she got a response, though not the one she was looking for. Rather than wake up, he simply rolled over, away from her. She sighed in frustration. Well, at least she knew she had his name right.

"Luke!" She said loudly, this time in a very chafed manner.

"It's not even light out, go away!" The muffled whine came through as the slumbering teen shifted his weight and repositioned his arms in an attempt to get comfortable. Great. He probably thought she was his mother or something.

"Luke! Wake up!"

"Whatever you have to do, you can do yourself. I am not switching again," he grumbled as he brought his hands up to cover his ears. Just as she was about to give in and go grab some water from the river she could hear flowing nearby, he rolled back towards her, and his eyes slowly cracked open.

He looked at her sleepily for a moment, where he was and what had happened slowly working its way through the sleepy haze in his mind. His eyes opened wide and he sat up panicked but stopped, bringing a hand to his now-spinning head, but never taking an eye off of her. Interesting... perhaps he wasn't as completely incompetent as she had previously thought.

Luke watched her suspiciously as he waited for his head to stop spinning in circles. When she made no move, he relaxed a bit and instead took the opportunity to actually look at her. Now that she wasn't a blur in the courtyard, he could see that she wore a brown uniform with a yellow lining, the likes of which he had never seen, though he was hardly in any position to know the first thing about uniforms. The only ones he could recognize were those of the White Knights and the Kimlascan Guard from the palace.

Her tan hair fell gently down her back, and rivalled his own in length. Her bangs were swept to the right and covered one of her blue eyes. The moonlight was reflected off the knives strapped to her legs, and she still held onto her staff. There was something about her that seemed strangely...familiar, but Luke couldn't quite put his finger on it.

Luke also found himself under her intense scrutiny. She eyed him up and down a couple times before crossing her arms across her chest as if displeased with what she saw.

Well Luke wasn't displeased with what he saw. She was rather...well endowed. He knew much
better than to comment on this fact though. He had learned quite painfully, from a certain livid young princess, that a woman's chest, or lack thereof, was not a suitable topic for conversation.

"Are you alright?" She finally asked, her hand gently reaching towards the head he realized he was still holding. Her voice was a lot softer than Luke expected it to be, but it still had a touch of coldness to it.

"Yeah I'm fine," Luke replied, moving away from her searching hand, "But where the hell are we? And how the hell did we get here?"

"I don't know where we are. As for how we got here, it would seem that hyperresonance occurred between us."

"A...what?"

"A hyperresonance. An isofon induced resonance. I didn't realize you were a Seventh Fonist too. That was careless of me."

"And that means...what exactly? Look, I don't have any clue what you're going on about but I'm no fonist. Now just who are you?"

"My name is Tear." She scowled. Of course; she was stuck with an idiot. "Now if you don't mind, can we save the questions until later? I'd rather not spend any more time than necessary here; it can be dangerous in the wilderness, especially at night."

"So where do you suggest we go? We have no idea where we even are."

"Look behind you."

Luke got up and walked through the flowers to the cliff's edge. As far as his eyes could see was water. It was nothing like the port in Baticul where the water was murky and dirty. The water was crystal clear and the moonlight glittered off the gentle waves. Luke stood in awe of the scene before him, the potential threat behind him completely forgotten.

Tear watched him and noted how easily he had dropped his guard. So he was still an amateur after all. Gauging his skill level was proving difficult; he hid his inaptitude well. Someone had trained him, though the speed with which he seemed to forget it all made her wonder if he even realized what he'd been taught. Still, he was almost kind of cute standing there smiling at the scenery. She shook the thought out of her head. He was trained by Van; there was no saying what his intentions might be. She wasn't going to repeat his amateur mistake.

"We should be going. The river should take us out to the sea there, from which we should be able to find a road." Tear took the first few steps down towards the valley, but didn't hear a second set following in her wake. She glanced behind her, noting that Luke had turned to face her, but had no intention of following her. "Well, are you coming?"

"Are you going to tell me why you broke into our manor, or tried to kill Master Van, or anything?"

"Look, can we can talk later? Right now, I want to get out of here before any monsters show up."

"So how do I know that you aren't planning something? I'm not going anywhere unless you do some explaining."

Lovely. He was stubborn too. "I'm sorry I can't explain that right now, and even if I did, I doubt you'd understand; but I assure you I have no intention of harming you."
"Then what are you going to do?"

"I'll return you to your home in Baticul, since it's my fault you ended up here. Will you trust me?"

Luke took a moment and considered her request. She seemed sincere, and he wasn't going to get far on his own. He just wanted to go home. "Yeah… I'll trust you," he finally said, advancing towards her.

"Then let's get out of here before any monsters show up."

The rustle of the bushes was the only warning either of them got as the boar charged them. Tear easily sidestepped its charge, but Luke wasn't nearly as quick on his feet. The boar caught his leg and sent him crashing face-first into the ground.

Great. Just great. Tear wasted no time beginning to focus, before the boar had a chance to recover. She eyed Luke lying on the ground, disappointed. She had hoped that the presence of a somewhat decent swordsman would make this trip a bit easier for her, but he was a total novice. Certainly not someone she could count on. She would have to heal him after she took care of this, but for now, she'd leave him crippled where he was. There were more pressing concerns.

Breaking free from her train of thought, Tear noticed the sudden absence of her foe. She began to look around her, not daring to move for fear of further breaking her concentration. Fonic artes were tricky at best, and hers in particular even more so. The last thing she needed was to loose one beyond her control, but unless she could spot her target again, her hit wouldn't land. She carefully watched, thoroughly searching the grass and bushes for any sign of movement, knowing better than to hope that their foe had simply wandered off; but in the scarce light offered by the moon, her search was fruitless. Then came a noise, and the sound of movement: it had gotten around behind her, and it was charging again.

She immediately halted her arte, dispersing the fonons she had gathered, but in the aftermath of her spell, she was unable to get out of the boar's oncoming charge.

The sound of an unsheathing sword, and then a cry into the night as the boar defied its fate, succumbing to death all the same.

Luke's hand trembled but he willed it to stop and quickly took control of his growing anxiety. There was so much blood. It wasn't as if he didn't expect it after killing the thing, but he didn't expect there to be so much. He was no stranger to seeing blood, usually his own, and if he got lucky sometimes it was Asch's, but it was seldom more than a cut or a scratch that didn't heal within day or so. He bent down, his leg still protesting the unwanted movement, and wiped his sword on the grass before replacing it in his sheathe.

What a strange one he was turning out to be. Tear watched him wipe his sword off and stand back up. He had caught her completely by surprise; he was nothing like the sheltered noble she expected him to be. There was no doubt Luke was an amateur, the soft tremble and unease he showed in the face of battle confirmed that much, but the way he hid his ineptitude was quite unlike anything she had ever seen. He had returned to battle and made it look like he was just fine, only the way he stood, with all his weight on his right leg, betrayed his injury. It wasn't something he picked up from Van. Of that much she was sure.

Damn his leg hurt. Stupid boar, he should have been paying more attention. Asch would have laughed at him for that pathetic display. He was glad that at least he had managed to finish it off, though his leg certainly didn't agree. Then again, he had finished more battles, with a lot more injuries than that before. Stupid Asch, never went easy on him. Half the injuries he has incurred in
his life he could attribute to his older sibling. But in the end, he had never sustained any permanent
damage, and all that training did manage to save him, so he supposed he couldn't really hold it
against Asch.

"Are you alright?" Tear asked, not really waiting for the predicted 'no I'm fine' before kneeling
down to take a closer look at his leg. She gently touched it and Luke bit back a yelp from the
sudden pain that shot up his leg. Slowly that pain diffused, and soon it was almost gone altogether;
replaced by a rather gentle warmth coming from a familiar diffuse flow.

"You're a healer?" Luke asked, surprise lining his voice.

"Well yes. I told you I'm a Seventh Fonist, it shouldn't come as such a shock that I know some
healing artes." Luke racked his brain trying to remember what it meant to be a Seventh Fonist. He
could recollect being told about it, but nothing in particular came to mind. "Why do you sound so
surprised?"

"I guess I didn't think someone like you would turn out to be a healer."

"What do you mean by 'someone like me'?"

"Well, you snuck into my home and tried to kill Master Van, so I just didn't exactly picture you as a
healer."

"Ugh, I can't believe you! Don't you know anything? Or do you even think for that matter? You're
a Seventh Fonist just like I am; it shouldn't be that much of a surprise."

"I told you before. I'm not a fonist! I have no idea what you're going on about!"

Tear eyed him suspiciously. He was a Seventh Fonist, whether he knew it or not. Otherwise, there
was no way that a hyperresonance could have occurred between them. He obviously didn't know
anything. It might explain why him manor was so heavily guarded, but pushing the issue any
further now would be a waste of both their time.

The journey down the valley was tedious, but after his first unexpected encounter, Luke somehow
managed to rise to the occasion and they didn't have any particular difficulty. For the most part
they walked in silence, minus the odd complaints from Luke. But through his whining she did
manage to learn a bit about him. He was a year older than she was, he hated getting his coat dirty,
his favourite food was chicken (and he was hungry), he didn't like getting his coat wet, he liked the
flowers by the river, and he hated how the mud clung to his coat. He did seem particularly avid
about the condition of his coat. Were all nobles so...conceited? It must be nice, not to have a care
in the world outside of one's clothing.

"Hey!" Luke called, hopping onto a fallen tree to cross the river.

The man who has been drawing water from the river looked up, surprised at the sound of another
voice in such a remote place. "You!" The man cried, a shaky finger pointed straight at Luke. "D-
Don't tell me you're with the Dark Wings!"

Startled by the man's response, Luke nearly fell into the river just managing to maintain his
balance long enough to crash onto the opposite riverbank. "Owww. Don't startle me like that! Jeez.
And who the hell are the Dark Wings?"

Tear gracefully stepped off the log beside Luke and the man backed off even further. "Th-They're
bandits! Two men and a woman! But wait...there are only two of you."
"My apologies for my companion's behaviour. We were travelling to the capital but got lost and wound up here."

"To the capital? That's where I'm heading as well. I'm a coachman, a wheel on my coach was acting up and we lost our water, so I stopped here to get some more."

"Would it be possible to get a ride from you then?" Tear inquired, anxious for any opportunity to shorten what was already looking to become a long journey.

"Sure but...uh..." Tear noticed the coachman eyeing Luke warily. "What's your friend's problem?" Luke had positioned himself, sitting cross-legged with his arms folded across his chest. He had put on a slight pout and was glaring at the coachman.

"I am not some stupid bandit," Luke mumbled causing Tear to roll her eyes in frustration.

"Oh grow up!" Tear kicked him in the shin. Luke yelped and scrambled to his feet, before launching into a tirade of complaints that Tear simply blocked out. This was going to be a really long journey.

She wasn't listening. No surprise there, but Luke felt better once he had gotten it all out. Life was easier that way. Get it out, put it behind you, and life goes on.

"A coach huh? And he said he's heading to the capital?" Luke asked Tear, not really expecting more than the exasperated sigh that he got. "So are we catching a ride or what?"

"Wow. Slow down," the coachman intervened, "We still haven't discussed payment. To the capital will cost you 12 000 gald each. You have enough on you?"

"That's expensive." Tear sighed disappointedly.

"Well, I can take care of that once we get there." Luke tossed in casually. It didn't seem like all that much money, and it was worth it if it could get him home.

"No good, I'm going to need payment in advance."

Tear sighed and stood silently hesitating before reaching inside her uniform and pulling out a jewelled pendant. The violet gem glistened in the pale light of the impending sunrise. "Take this." She managed with a painful finality.

"Wow. This is quite the gem you have!"

"You're not kidding," Luke said looking over the coachman's shoulder at the treasure Tear had just turned over. Even his mother had few jewels in her collection that compared to this. Sure she had all kinds of expensive baubles and trinkets, but they weren't nearly as pretty as this was. "You're sure you're giving this up? It looks awfully valuable."

"You want to walk?" She snapped, her voice suddenly becoming cold and harsh.


"Then let's be off," The coachmen said as he escorted the two to his coach and they departed as the sun broke the horizon.

When Luke opened his eyes again, the sun was already high in the sky. The open fields went on as far as the eye could see, the seamless horizon broken only by the odd standing of trees. Luke
allowed himself to quietly observe the passing landscape before showing any sign of being awake. The outside world really was an amazing place. There was something about it that all the books Asch had shoved under his nose just couldn't portray.

Asch.

Luke felt a pang of homesickness as his thoughts drifted to his older sibling. What were they up to right now? Guy was probably running around frantically like he used to when Luke was younger and liked to hide on him. Asch somehow always managed to find him, regardless of how well he hid himself. Luke allowed himself a grin. Asch was probably at home, barking orders at the frantic Guy no doubt.

Luke didn't think he would ever miss his mundane life at the manor, but now that it was gone, he wanted it all back. He wanted to get up late and have Asch yell at him for being lazy. He wanted Guy to sit and rant to him about Asch's latest temper tantrum. Hell, he even missed Natalia's non-stop prodding and scolding, even if it was over nothing. He would never understand women. Speaking of women…

"You're finally awake," Tear said as he turned over and sat up wiping the last of the sleep out of his eyes. The coldness in her voice and the harsh short sentences she had been using since they left the valley had vanished as if they had never existed at all. Just great, she was as bipolar as Natalia. That was exactly what he wanted to deal with. There was only one thing he knew about handling women: stay on their good side. It was safer there.

"It's about 2 more hours ride to the capital. Once we get past Rotelro Bridge here it should be a bit of a smoother ride." The coachman called back from his place at the reins.

Luke couldn't resist sticking his head out the window. Looking ahead he saw a huge river cutting across the landscape and just up the road was a huge stone bridge that stretched out across it. Luke watched it approach in awe, equally enjoying the feeling of the cool wind on his face. They hit a bump as the coach's wheels moved onto the cobblestone from the dirt road on which they had been travelling, which succeeded in smashing Luke's head against the top of the window frame. The stifled laughter from inside the coach didn't help his pride much either.

Luke sat back down in his seat, or rather, slouched down in his seat and crossed his arms, refusing to look at Tear who was still stifling a giggle here and there. A huge crack echoed across the open water puyting an end to both Luke's pouting and Tear's snickering.

"What was that?" Luke was amazed at how quickly Tear became serious, despite her unsuccessful efforts to control her giggling only moments earlier.

"I-I don't know," The coachmen replied as he attempted to calm his startled herd. The steady sound of rocks hitting the water, and a second large crack got the coach moving again, this time at full speed. No sooner had they moved, than the bridge began to give way, crumbling under the weight of the coach. On the very last stretch, a stray rock crippled the wheel on the left side sending the coach and its passengers crashing onto the riverbank.

"Owwwww." Luke stood up, his entire body protesting the movement.

"Are you two alright?" The coachman inquired.

"Yes. We're both alright." Tear replied. "But…" Tear eyed the bridge that was now nothing more than a few stones on each side of the riverbank.
"It's strange. Emperor Peony keeps Rotelro Bridge well maintained. Why would it just give out like that?"

"Wait a second." Tear cut in alarmed, "Emperor Peony? You mean we're in Malkuth?"

"Whoa! Wait a sec! You said we were headed to Baticul!" Luke jumped in.

"No. We were on our way to Grand Chokmah, capital of Malkuth." The coachman replied confused. "If you wanted to go to Baticul – that's the other way, but with the bridge out, you'll have to head through Kaitzur or Akzerieuth instead."

"Ugh." Tear sighed, crossing her arms trying to think of something. Nothing in particular came to her. It was such a foolish mistake to make.

"Look, why don't you come with me to Engeve at least. It's not far off from here. You can at least get some food and re-supply there." The coachman carefully untied the two remaining beasts that had gotten tangled in the wreckage of the coach, and so unable to flee into the wilderness with their comrades. "Here," he handed the reins to Tear, "you two can ride that one, and I'll ride this girl here."

"We're riding on those?" Luke looked at the creature suspiciously. It was planning to toss him the second he got on its back. He just knew it.

Tear sent a look over to the coachman, who picked Luke right up and dropped him on the creature's back. Tear swiftly pulled herself up as well and grabbed the reins. She sighed. If this kept up, it would be a painfully long journey, if she still had her sanity by the end of it.

Despite Engeve's small population, the small farming town was almost as lively as Baticul. Children were running about, chasing after their flocks, playing in the midday sun. The small, quaint houses lined the streets behind the stands where foods to suit anyone's taste could be found. Among the houses, crops of corn among other vegetables grew. Orchards of fruits and fields upon fields of grains lined the outskirts of the village.

"There you guys are," The coachman said as he helped Tear down of their mount, leaving gravity to assist Luke in his far from graceful descent.

"Where are you headed from here?" Tear casually inquired.

"I'm going to head on to the capital. I have family up that way. Best of luck to the both of you."

"Thank you very much," Tear replied as the coachman took the reins of the second mount and departed from their company.

"Okay then, with Rotelro Bridge out, we either have to pass through Akzerieuth or take the road to Kaitzur. Either way, we should stock up on food while we're here." Tear said thinking out loud, trying to plan out their route, and how far they'd have to go before the next chance to stock up on food. "What other kinds of things do you like to eat Luke?"

No answer.

"Luke?" Tear turned around to where she had last seen Luke on the ground after falling off their mount and, much to her dismay, but not really to her surprise, he wasn't there. Tear set off, in a quickly deteriorating mood, to find him, feeling more and more like a babysitter. She could only hope he had enough sense to stay in the village. He was going to get an earful when she found him.
Finding him, however, was proving to be more difficult than she had initially thought, in spite of the fact that his red hair should stick out like a lake in the desert. She had gone down every street in Engeve. She had explored waterwheels, through crops, among the orchards, and even among the animals grazing in the fields, but no Luke.

"Hey," Tear heard a voice coming from behind her. She turned around to see a young girl. The girl's jet black curls were a stark contrast to her pink uniform. Purple lines on the front drew out the symbol of the Oracle knights, proving her to be far more than just any child. Tear looked her in the eye to show that the girl had her attention. The girl continued. "Have you seen a boy wandering around? Little dull, kinda out of it?"

Tear fought back a chuckle. "I'm looking for one of those myself. Let me know if you happen across one."

"Boy troubles, huh? I swear, you have to put them on leash nowadays! Well, good luck finding your boyfriend," the girl offered before continuing off in the opposite direction leaving a rather insulted Tear in the middle of the road. She had far better taste than that.

It took Tear another 20 minutes of combing Engeve before finally spotting a flash of red behind the inn. Luke was standing on a fence peering over a small rickety wall. Why of all places? "Luke!" Tear yelled and was rewarded when a rather startled young noble fell head-first over the wall and crashed into the make-shift shed.

"What are you doing?" The infuriated inn-keeper snarled as he dragged Luke out of his storage room by the collar.

"I just wanted to know what was inside. Let go!" Luke yelled, his demands carried out as the inn keeper forcibly tossed him on the floor at the entrance. "Ouch! Easy!" Luke stood up and brushed the dirt off his coat, all the while glaring at the inn keeper.

"I don't go easy with thieves!" The antagonized innkeeper shouted, drawing the attention of several of the village's inhabitants.

"I'm not some petty thief." Luke rebutted. "I'm-

"Luke!" Tear yelled in his ear, sending him a good ten feet in the air.

"You know him?" The Inn keeper demanded.

"He's currently travelling with me," Tear supplied as Luke caught his breath. Normally, she'd just have let him get chewed out, but she felt a little guilty, seeing as it was her fault he fell in. So she'd help him out. This time. "It is his first time here so he's been a bit overwhelmed by the sights, and got out of hand. Will you accept our apologies?"

"Well, you didn't take anything, so I let you off this time, but don't you dare let me catch you snooping around in my storehouse again!"

"Don't worry. I won't." Luke replied dourly. "Nothing worth looking at in there anyways..." He mumbled once he was out of an earshot.

"What do you think you're doing?" Luke cringed at Tear's reprimanding, expected as it may have been.

"I thought I saw something, so I went to see what it was..." Luke mumbled, knowing it wouldn't do a thing to prevent the lecture he was about to get.
"First of all, you can't just go climbing people's fences! Second of all, don't just go carelessly flinging your name around! Do you have any idea who your father is?" His father? How did his father get dragged into this? Tear's voice reduced to a hiss as she continued her lecture. "Your father is one of Malkuth's greatest enemies. There are a lot of people around here who've probably had family killed by your father." Oh. That's how.

"But wait a second…I thought Kimlasca and Malkuth had a peace treaty…" Luke could have sworn that's what Asch and Master Van had said. There was peace between the two countries wasn't there? So why was anyone, much less his father, doing any kind of killing? He hated how a complete stranger seemed to know more about his own family than he did. It left a bad taste in his mouth. The pointed look he was getting from her at the moment wasn't improving his disposition much either.

"Look, let's just-" but Tear hadn't even finished her thought before Luke began frantically searching through his pockets. "What is it?" Tear inquired.

"Dammit! I must have dropped it when I fell!" Luke exclaimed wasting no time in spinning around and heading straight for the inn. Tear bit back her frustration and followed. This was going to be an excruciatingly long journey.

The crowd in front of the inn kept Luke from getting very far, and the squabbling voices drowned out his protests.

"There he is!" the crowd silenced and all eyes fell on Luke. "He's the one I caught raiding the storehouse earlier!" Two men had Luke pinned before he could utter a word of protest.

"Now, now. What is all the fuss about?" A calm voice subdued the crowd and the man from which it had come approached the boy in question. The man's red eyes offset his shoulder length auburn hair, giving him a creepy air about him. You knew just by looking, no one crossed this man, well, none who lived to tell of it.

Tear made her way through the crowd to where the man was eyeing Luke. His blue uniform spoke of the Malkuth military, the person adorning them, of a higher ranking officer. Someone of his composure and demeanour was no mere foot soldier. He pushed up his glasses with a forefinger before asking Luke his name.


"Luke, why is it you are here?"

"He's here because he stole the food from the storehouse!" Concurring cries from the crowd confirmed what the first person had said.

"I'm not some thief! I told you I fell in earlier I didn't take a thing!"

"I was asking our young friend here."

"I caught you red-handed on your first attempt!" the inn keeper shouted completely ignoring the man's statement. "Now all the food from our storehouse is missing!"

"I bet he's a member of the Dark wings!"

"My my, such a lively bunch," the man shrugged.
"He's not a member of the Dark Wings." Everyone turned to look at Tear.

"I can confirm that," the man supplied. "Rotelro Bridge collapsed, and the bandits in question were recently spotted near Chessedonia. There isn't any way for them to have moved that quickly."

"That still doesn't explain why he was caught in the storehouse earlier!"

"Well?" The man passed the attention to Luke.

"I saw something moving, so I went to see what it was." Luke reluctantly mumbled not looking anyone in the eye.

"Was it this colour?" A young voice piped up. The boy from whom it came made his way through the crowd to Luke, holding what looked like a bunch of fur in between his fingers. His green hair stood out against his pale complexion that almost matched his white robes. The boy passed the fur to Luke who examined it for a moment before passing it back to him.


"I found this in the storehouse. It's fur from a sacred cheagle. I'll bet that's what took your food." The boy stated, passing the fur to the inn keeper. The inn keeper looked at the fur for a moment, and then nodded his head towards Luke's captors, who immediately let him go. The boy was right.

The crowd dispersed, leaving only Luke, Tear, the man, the boy and the inn keeper standing in front of the inn.

"I'm sorry about this," the inn keeper finally said.

"It's okay," Luke answered insincerely, still rubbing his aching wrists. "I guess I did kind of ask for it."

"Why did you come back here anyways?"

"Oh! I dropped something when I fell; I just wanted to get it back."

"Sorry kid, the storehouse is completely empty. Whatever you dropped, those cheagles hauled off with the rest of the food."

Luke clenched his fist and scowled. He couldn't believe he actually lost it. Worse yet – it was stolen! Some stupid cheagle had taken it. Well, whatever the hell a cheagle was, it had another thing coming if it thought he was going to let them keep their grubby hands on it. Oh, or the food, they probably couldn't have that either.

"Is the food here really that valuable?" He finally inquired.

"Yeah. Food here is our only source of income. Without it, we can't sustain ourselves. But don't you worry. We'll find some way to stop those cheagles."

"Thank you both for your assistance," Tear said to the man and the boy who were still standing nearby with a slight bow.

"Certainly. We've met Luke over there, but you are?"

"I'm Tear. We're travelling together, but we got on the wrong coach and ended up here. May I ask who you are?"
"I'm Colonel Jade Curtiss, 3rd division Malkuth imperial forces. If you don't mind, however, we must be off. Come now Ion, we leave early tomorrow. You know Anise will be upset if you don't get your rest."

"Alright then," Ion replied. "It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance!" He said cheerfully before allowing himself to be shuffled off.

"Thanks!" Luke called after them waving, a huge smile on his face.

Tear watched him waving, the sun setting behind him, making his hair glow golden as it was tossed around by his exaggerated gesture; his emerald eyes alight with the exuberance in his carefree smile.

Tear couldn't help but smile.

_Maybe this journey wouldn't be so long after all._
"So that was Fon Master Ion..." Tear said after Luke had settled down and returned to fretting over the loss of...whatever it was he lost. Luke never did mention what he was so worried about.

"That was Fon Master Ion?" Luke spun around after having checked his pockets for the millionth time. It was definitely gone.

"Well, I've never met the Fon Master myself. But from what I've heard of him, he certainly fits the description. I also ran into a Fon Master Guardian while I was looking for you. I'd say the chances are pretty good he's the Fon Master."

"But that's impossible! Fon Master Ion is missing!"

"Missing? That's the first I've heard of that. But since at least one of the Fon Master Guardians is here, he's definitely here on official business."

"But Master Van said that Ion had gone missing!"

"Well, arguing about it here won't do any good. And for the record, you can't believe everything you're told. Least of all by Van."

"Look, I don't know what your issue is with Master Van is, and frankly I don't even want to know; but I for one have no reason to doubt what he said."

"You mean other than the fact the Fon Master just walked by."

"You said yourself, you've never even seen the Fon Master. How do you know for sure that that's him?" Luke asked, his voice steadily creeping up in volume.

"Well I didn't see you asking him. You've made it quite clear you have a working mouth of your own." Luke said nothing. "You could always still go ask him." Tear pointed out. Luke mumbled a reply that Tear didn't catch. "What now?"

"I don't want to get involved," Luke muttered a little louder.

"What?" Tear repeated, her hands on her hips. "First I can't get you to shut up, now I can't get you to talk! Speak up."

"I don't want to get involved," Luke said loudly. "Did you hear that? I. Do. Not. Want. To. Get. Involved." Luke punctuated every word by inching closer to Tear surprising her by just how upset he was. What in all of Auldrant did he mean by that now?

"I don't think I understand." Tear said, becoming quite serious. Whatever the issue was, even she could tell it was important.

"Do I have to spell it out for you? Going after Ion means dealing with that Jade-guy. Weren't you the one just lecturing me about my status? I don't want to get involved! I just want to go home." Luke bit his lip in frustration. It was bad enough without her making him repeat it three times. As much as it was killing him to go find out if in fact that had been the Fon Master or not, the less he had to deal with that Jade-what's-his-face, the better.

Luke had always thought he more or less understood matters between Kimlasca and Malkuth. He
knew that the two countries had a far less than pleasant history, but he thought that peace had been established between the two. Or at least, that's what he had always understood, but as he was slowly learning that things weren't as clear cut as he thought they were. Luke was realizing just how little he really knew about the whole situation so if he could stay out of it, he would. Less chance he'd end up doing something stupid.

Tear understood his reasoning, as odd as it was to see such rationale coming from Luke. Being a Kimlascan noble, it made sense he would want to avoid any unnecessary contact or conflicts with the Malkuth military. The level head with which he'd made that deduction also confused her. So far she'd presumed him to be hot-headed, jumping into any situation without thinking. Apparently he did have a head on his shoulders, even if he didn't use it as often as she'd like.

"So!" Luke finally said, all the frustration in his previous statements completely gone, "Where do these stupid little cheagle things come from?"

"Well from what I heard, cheagles live in the forest north of here. However, I would like to point out that cheagles are the sacred beasts of the order of Lorelei, I wouldn't be calling them 'stupid little things' quite so loudly."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. So are you coming with me or not?"

"Going with you? It's almost dark out! Where do you thinking you're going?"

"I'm going to go to the northern woods, then I'm going to find one of these little buggers and then I'm- hey! What are you doing? Let go!" Luke struggled against the firm hold Tear had on his collar as she dragged him in the opposite direction.

"It's almost night, and unlike some people, not everyone slept until noon. Besides, what do you think you're going to find in the dark? Not to mention the added danger of being out in the wilderness at night." Luke finally stopped struggling, instead just slipping out of his jacket.

"I'm not scared of some stupid monsters!" Luke protested. It figured. Of course she didn't understand. No one ever did. All he got in response to that statement was his jacket thrown at him.

"Look," Tear finally said, "I don't know what the cheagles took, and I'm guessing by that look that you aren't planning to tell me; but that's no reason to rush out at all hours of the night into untamed wilderness. Whatever they took, they will still have in the morning. So let's just go to the inn, get a good night sleep, and if you're dead set on going, we'll head out first thing in the morning."

"Fine," Luke conceded. Tear was grateful; she didn't want to resort to using her hymns to keep the idiot from hurting himself. As much as he certainly seemed to trust her, she doubted that trust would last if she had to pull something like that. "But we're going first thing!" He added as an afterthought.

"Alright," Tear agreed, though she didn't really think about it as the two headed towards the inn. Somehow she got the impression she would be the one waking him up in the morning.

Tear didn't realize just how early Luke Fon Fabre could get up when he was on a mission, but by the time she crawled out of bed at sunrise, he was up, ready, and impatiently tapping his foot on the floor while leaning on the door frame. He waited without saying a word while she quickly freshened up and gathered together her supplies.

"You're up early," Tear said in an attempt to break the awkward silence.
"If I didn't know better, I'd say you sounded surprised," Luke taunted in return. He really hadn't been up that much longer than her, but it was more than a test of his patience to wait for Tear to wake up. He didn't know how much of a morning person she was, and the last thing he needed was a tired, cranky woman on his back all day about everything because he woke her up before she was ready.

For the most part, he himself wasn't really a morning person. He was much happier sleeping himself out, but the consequences of not showing up on time to one of Asch's morning practice sessions, which usually involved being forcefully hauled out of bed after being doused with a substantial amount of very cold water, had him able to get up at the crack of dawn if needed for several years now. Besides, this was important.

Tear stifled a chuckle. She supposed she had that one coming since the conversation they had the last time they had awoken in each other's presence. Not much point in wasting time, the sooner they got going, the sooner they could begin the trip back to Baticul, despite her sneaking suspicions that this little detour was going to take all day regardless. "Shall we be off then?" She finally offered as she grabbed the last of their supplies.

"Yeah, let's go!" Luke threw in enthusiastically.

"You two heading out already?" The inn keeper inquired.

"Yeah, we're going to go check out the forest north of here." Luke offered.

"You're going up to Cheagle Woods?"

"Yes, is that a problem?" Tear asked concernedly.

"No, not at all. I had a young fella looking for directions to the Cheagle Woods late last night. Told him he shouldn't go. Ever since that fire up north, things haven't been right in those woods. Make sure you watch your step."

"We will. Thank you for your concern." Tear replied with a slight bow to the innkeeper as she and Luke headed out the door. Tear could only wonder what she was getting herself into this time.

The appropriately named Cheagle Woods weren't as far from Engeve as Tear had initially thought, and they were at the forest's edge before mid-morning. The forest itself didn't seem overly daunting. There weren't any traces of the fire they had been told about; it must not have reached this far south. The forest was bright and overgrown with lush vegetation painting it a world of greens. The sun still crept through tree tops so the forest was well lit and didn't seem especially treacherous. In fact it seemed rather peaceful. No sooner had the thought grazed her mind, when an unidentified cry filled the air.

"Tear!" Luke called to the melodist and without waiting for a reply, turned around and took off in the direction of the cry.

Luke saw the boy first while Tear was still somewhere around the nearby outskirts of the woods. His familiar green hair was a mess and his white robe was dirty and stained. Ion was on his hands and knees and breathing hard, having given a good chase to the five ligers that were now circling him.

Luke had his sword drawn and through one of the beasts before having even stopped to consider the situation. A second one pounced, but he swung around and his momentum sent it crashing into the earth. In the brief pause, Luke could hear Ion's breathing behind him get heavier.
"Luke! Get out of there!" Luke heard Tear's voice call out. Luke instinctively jumped back; noticing for the first time the huge glyph that had appeared on the ground. A bright flash of light and a surge of fonons ensued, throwing Luke even further back, completely obliterating the remaining three ligers.

"Wow." Luke stood stunned for a moment staring at the void where his opponents had just stood, before running to the young boy's side. "Hey are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Ion hesitantly stood up, swaying from side to side for a moment before passing out all together.

"Whoa!" Luke managed to catch him before he hit the ground. The boy, for he couldn't be any more than 14, was unbelievably light in Luke's arms. His green hair almost blended in with their lush surroundings, though his skin was several shades paler than Luke's. Really, if he weren't wearing white robes, he'd almost look sickly. He had a slender build and had Luke not known any better he'd have almost mistaken him for a girl. He seemed so weak and fragile, but at the same time, the remnants of what he was capable of still clearly evident in what was now a clearing at the entrance to the woods.

"What the hell was that?" Luke cried out once Tear had gotten closer.

"I'm not sure. I've never seen anything like it before. That was a very powerful fonic arte." Tear looked over Ion who was still out cold in Luke's arms. "Is he alright?"

"Yeah, I think so. He's just worn out, but after that…I'm not entirely surprised," Luke replied with a new found respect for the boy he was holding onto. "So now what?"

"I suppose we should take him back to Engeve."

"Whoa whoa a second! If we take him all the way back to Engeve, it'll be almost afternoon by the time we get back. There's no telling how far those cheagles will have gotten!"

"So what? Are you saying we take him with us?"

"Well...yes."

"Luke… are you really sure about this? There's a really good chance that that's Fon Master Ion. And if it is, they will be looking for him. Didn't you say you didn't want to get involved?"

Luke hesitated for a moment before replying very firmly, "This is important."

Tear simply sighed. There was no point in trying to convince him otherwise. Just what did he lose that mattered so much to him? The way he hesitated reassured her that he at least somewhat understood the consequences of his choice. What bothered her is that even after everything he'd said last night, he decided to go ahead anyway. Just what did he want to get back so badly?

"Hey, you're up," Luke said, helping the unsteady Ion back on his feet. "Are you okay? That was quite the stunt you just pulled. Where did you learn something like that?"

"Oh! I'm sorry! Are you hurt? I didn't mean for you to be attacked as well. I didn't realize anyone else was in the vicinity."

"Hey don't worry about it, I'm totally fine." Luke cut the apologetic boy off, "That's what I get for not paying attention. Though I've got to say, I would love to know where you learned a trick like that! That kind of skill would come in handy!"
Ion chuckled, "That's a Daathic fonic arte. Only Fon Masters are allowed to learn Daathic fonic artes, so I'm sorry I can't teach it to you."

"Damn. Oh well." Luke sighed disappointedly. Man, if he could learn an arte like that, he'd finally be able to get one up on Asch... but no such luck, at least not today.

"Wait!" What Ion just said finally registering, "So you're the Fon Master?"

"That's right," Ion confirmed, "I am currently the Fon Master of the Order of Lorelei. Your name is Luke correct?"


"Luke... In ancient Ispanian that means-"

"Light of the sacred flame," Luke finished. Like he hadn't been told that enough times in his life.

"So you do know. It's a nice name."

"Th-Thank you," Luke happily stuttered before changing the subject. "So what brings you all the way out here by yourself?"

"I'm here to investigate the cheagles. They are herbivores, and very gentle by nature. It's not like them to be stealing food. Since the cheagles are the sacred beasts of the Order, I felt it was my responsibility to at least look into the matter."

"That's great! I'm looking for the cheagles too! They snatched something of mine up along with the food they stole, so I'm going to go get it back. We can go together then!"

"Luke!" Luke cringed at Tear's reprimanding voice. "You can't just go dragging the Fon Master into your crazy games! Besides, these woods aren't safe."

"Oh relax. He can take care of himself! Besides, he has just as much right to be here as we- Whoa!" Luke caught Ion as he just about fell over again. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"I'm sorry," Ion replied with a gentle smile, gratefully accepting Luke's arm as support. "Daathic fonic artes use up a lot of my strength, that's all. I'll be fine in a little while." Luke hadn't considered it before, but now that he thought on it, Ion was a lot paler than when they'd seen him yesterday.

"Okay, then no more using that crazy arte. I don't need you passing out on me again. Let us take care of the fighting, and you can keep an eye out for cheagles."

"You'd do that?" Ion asked incredulously, "You'd protect me? Why thank you Sir Luke!"

Luke turned several shades of red but as what Ion said sunk in, he positively beamed. "Sure I would.... but just call me Luke. The whole 'sir' thing is just weird."

"Okay then Luke!" Ion chuckled.

"Oh great," Tear mumbled under her breath. Just what she needed, someone to inflate Luke's ego. Well, she knew more ways than one to keep him grounded. The more pressing concern was the presence of the Fon Master in such a remote place. Luke had been under the impression that Ion was missing. Granted that it had been Van that had told him that; and while she wasn't one to take his words at face value, it was still enough to cause her some concern. Something was up.

"Oh I'm sorry!" Ion turned towards Tear, "I don't believe we've been properly introduced."
"My apologies Fon Master," Tear said with a slight bow, pushing her worries to the back of her mind for the moment, "I'm Locrian Sergeant Tear Grants. 1st Platoon, Oracle Knights Intelligence Division, under Grand Maestro Mohs' command."

"Whoa, wait! You're a member of the Oracle Knights?" A rather shocked Luke spat out.

"Oh! I know you," Ion replied completely oblivious to Luke's outburst, "You're Van's little sister."

"What?" Luke squeaked. He cleared his throat trying to bring his voice back down the octave it had just jumped. "If you're his sister, then why the hell were you trying to kill him?"

Luke never got an answer though; startled by his shriek, a little green cheagle popped out of a nearby bush and took off deeper into the woods.

"Look! It's a cheagle!" Ion pointed out.

"Alright! Let's go get them then!" Luke took off after it, not willing to miss out on the opportunity that, quite literally, just jumped out at him.

"Thank you" Tear whispered, as she and Ion moved to follow Luke.

"Would it be best for me not to inquire about you and Van?"

"It something between us that relates to my homeland. I don't want to get you or Luke involved."

"Alright then," Ion answered with a smile, "We'd better hurry though, or we'll be left behind."

"He really does have a one-track mind, doesn't he?"

"I can't believe we lost it." Luke sighed.

"Who lost it?" Tear taunted.

"Shut up! He was green….and in case you didn't notice, so is everything else around here!" Ion laughed as Luke got defensive. He had lost the little creature a scant few minutes after he and Tear had caught up, but it had led them to a slightly worn path that they were now following in hopes of finding the cheagle's home.

"Don't worry," Ion offered, "I'm sure their nest isn't very far from here."

"Yeah, I suppose. We've got to be getting close by now."

"Thank you for protecting me so far."

"Oh, it was nothing. No problem at all," Luke lied. Giant snails, ligers, and more large deformed birds then he could shake a stick at really wasn't nothing, but he was finally getting a good feel for real fights, so he didn't mind all that much.

Tear watched from a few paces back as Luke and Ion continued to happily chat. They had been doing so since she and Ion had caught up with Luke, probably almost an hour ago now. The noise they were making was probably scaring off the cheagles, but she didn't really want to tell them to stop. She was amazed at how well the two of them got along. She had expected Luke to look down on Ion as somewhat of a nuisance and a third wheel, but Luke, it seemed, was getting into the habit of surprising her.
The two had completely hit it off. She was amazed at just how comfortable they both seemed around each other. If she hadn't known any better, she'd have thought they'd been friends their entire lives. Of course, it helped that their personalities fit together like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Ion, humble and never without some kind of complement, and Luke who just couldn't get enough praise. That wasn't all though; there was something else there, some sort of unseen connection between the two that she couldn't quite figure out, and at times, despite their opposite demeanours, they seemed so alike.

"Look there!" Ion called out, pointing to a large tree with an opening at the base of the trunk. The tree easily stood twice the height of the trees around it, and its trunk looked wide enough to fit a small house. Despite its large size, leaves only seemed to grow at the top, while its lower branches stood bare. The vegetation at its roots was also sparse and stunted despite the lushness of the vegetation in the surrounding woods. "I'll bet that's where the cheagles live." No sooner had he said it then, a small cheagle, a pink one this time, came out of the opening, and upon seeing them, scrambled back in.

Despite the cheagle's smaller size, the opening at the base of the trunk was big enough for Luke to walk in unimpeded. The entrance was littered with fruits and breads all that bore the mark of Engeve on them, assuring Luke beyond all doubt that this was where he would find his missing treasure.

The inside of the tree was just as large as the outside suggested it would be. Moss grew on the inner walls and mushrooms of every size and colour dotted the earth. There were dozens of cheagles all over the place, jumping, running, eating, playing, all the while making the most hideous racket. Thankfully for Luke, as soon as he stepped inside, they all fell silent. Luke hadn't even gotten a sigh of relief out when all of them suddenly swarmed around the visitors.

They were so...so... cute! Tear watched them bouncing around and playing, and even as they swarmed around her, they made the most adorable little sounds. And they way the flapped their little ears! She just wanted to cuddle one and take it home with her.

"Could you please let us through?" Ion asked gently, kneeling down so he was closer to eye level with them.

"I don't think they can understand you," Luke offered.

"Actually, it's said that Yulia formed a pact with the cheagles and gained their aid."

"Are you of relation to Yulia Jue?" A voice called out. A couple of squeaks and the crowd of cheagles calmed down and parted, revealing a single purple cheagle that was obviously much older than the others.

"Ah. Are you the cheagle elder?" Ion asked.

"That is correct."


"That is the power of this ring that we were given by Yulia as proof of our pact. Are you of relation to Yulia?"

"I am Ion, the current Fon Master of the Order of Lorelei."

"So you're the one in charge around here?" Luke demanded, tired of waiting on formalities. He'd waited on more than enough formalities in his life to last him...well several lifetimes. "Cause if you
are, I've got a few bones to pick with you. Starting with the stuff you stole from Engeve."

"So you have come to exterminate us then."

"Hardly, look, why are you stealing stuff anyways? I mean, don't you eat the grass and stuff?"

"Not long ago, one of our own started a fire that burned the woods in the north." The cheagle elder explained, "Since then, the ligers that lived there have moved down here, and we have been in danger."

"Yeah, and? You can deal with that without stealing!"

"Luke!" Tear interjected angrily.

"What? It's only fair. You heard them. It was their fault that the forest burnt, so they have to share their home. What's wrong with that?"

"But Ligers prey on cheagles," Ion pointed out. "Did you steal the food from Engeve so that you wouldn't be eaten?"

"Yes. It is as you say."

"Wait a second." Luke threw in, "If I remember right, doesn't Engeve supply food to everywhere? These guys can't just be taking it all!"

"What if we were to do something about the ligers?" Ion suggested, "Then they wouldn't have to steal food."

"Whoa there. I didn't come to go liger hunting. I came to get what these guys stole from me!"

"What is this about stealing something of yours?" The cheagle elder inquired.

"You hauled off something of mine with all that food you stole last night! And I want it back!"

"What is this 'something' that was stolen?"

Luke answered by simply bending down and glaring at the cheagle elder causing it to take a couple nervous steps back. "You'll know it's mine."

"Then let's make a deal. We will search for this item that you lost, in exchange; will you go and negotiate with the liger queen for us?"

"Can these liger-things talk too?"

"No." The cheagle elder made a few more squeaks and a small blue cheagle came to the front of the crowd. "This little one caused the fires up north. He will accompany you as a translator." The cheagle elder removed the ring and passed it to the little cheagle who placed it around his belly.

"Hi there!" The little cheagle's voice was almost as high pitched as its incomprehensible squeaks, and Luke figured he would just about rather listen to nails on a chalkboard than this thing talk for any length of time. "My name is Mieu! It's a pleasure to meet you!"

Luke cringed, but bit back the harsh reply he had been formulating. The little thing hadn't really done anything. So instead he watched as Tear and Ion introduced themselves and with a defeated sigh, the three of them and their latest tag along set out towards the liger's lair.
After having fought liger upon liger on the way to the queen, Luke thought he had been ready for just about anything. He was wrong; the liger queen was easily three times larger than the grandest of the ligers he had seen in the woods and looked a hell of a lot tougher. She sat curled protectively around a nest of eggs, glaring dangerously at the intruders.

The cave in which she had built her nest didn't make the best of places to fight either, should she decide she was hungrier than she was talkative. The rocks were mossy and slippery, which made it hard to get, much less keep any decent footing. The lighting wasn't all that great either, but at least it was still good enough to see.

"Mieu, can you go and talk to her?" Ion asked.

"Certainly!" Mieu hopped down from Tear's shoulder, where she had happily been carrying him since they had left the nesting grounds.

Watching the young cheagle talk to the liger queen was indeed fascinating, not that Luke could make heads or tails of the assortment of squeaks and growls, but it slowly became obvious that things weren't going well.

"Uh...uh-oh!" Mieu finally said, "She says her eggs are about to hatch. She's really mad. She says she's going to kill us and feed us to her children!"

The liger queen proved Mieu's words true by standing up and letting out an earth-shattering roar. The resonating echo shook the cave and loosed three small boulders from the ceiling.

Luke watched as everything played out before him as if in slow motion. He grinned. It had been years since he'd played this game...

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Asch held up two identical rubber balls. "When I say go, I'm going to throw these up into the air. You throw yours at the same time." Asch added indicating the third ball that was in Luke's hand.

Luke looked at the ball for a moment, not exactly sure what was going on. He looked back at Asch confused. Asch let out an annoyed sigh.

"When I say go. Throw it as high as you can."

"M'kay!" Luke answered with a smile. This sounded like fun!

"Then you have to take that stick," Asch pointed to the wooden sword-like stick in Luke's other hand, "And hit all three before they hit the ground." Asch continued.


"Because that's how the game works! If any of them hit the ground before you hit them, then you lose." Asch replied somewhat disgruntled. Everyone thought it was too soon to train Luke in any way, but Asch insisted. If they refused to train Luke he would do it himself. Luke may have the mentality of a 1 year old, but he was physically capable of anything Asch himself was. Besides... someday Luke would have to be able to protect himself.

Asch smiled.

"Okay. Ready?"


"Go!"

Two of the rocks went flying harmlessly into the wall, the third crumbled from a well placed blow, its pieces falling harmlessly around the little cheagle it would have crushed. Luke spun around, throwing Ion out of the way as the liger queen pounced on her would-be prey. Luke barely managed to get out of the way as she doubled back, much faster than Luke though possible for something so huge, and took a good swipe at him.

Luke noticed Tear focusing and lured the queen in the other direction. Her claws and fangs were nothing to laugh at, and it took all of Luke's focus just to stay out of their way. There was no way he was going to be able to get anywhere near her. Getting close enough to land a decent hit meant losing a limb...or an organ, all of which Luke would much rather keep...and keep intact.

Things were only getting worse as the battle drew on. Tear's artes weren't doing much better at slowing it down, and both of them were quickly tiring. If this kept up, they were going to end up as food for the liger queen's kits.

It happened so suddenly, Luke wasn't entirely sure exactly what had happened. The ground beneath them opened up, and sharp stones shot out from within its depths, skewing the liger queen on the spot as she prepared to pounce. Luke fell backwards, partially due to the minor earthquake that the arte had caused, but mostly just out of pure shock. What the hell-

"Hmm." The Malkuth Colonel approached the liger queen's body and examined it for a moment before confirming her death.

"Oh no!" Luke stood up and brushed himself off before carefully heading over to the liger's nest. "Look what you did!" Luke yelled at the officer, "The eggs all broke!"

"And a good thing too." He replied.

"What?"


"Yes. They would have been hunted and destroyed even had you not interfered. Or of course there is the possibility that they could have gone unnoticed, hatched, and slaughtered half of Engeve." The man who had introduced himself the night before as Jade offered.

"Aren't we the optimist..." Luke mumbled, "Still... it leaves a bad taste in my mouth." Luke eyed the broken eggs before returning to the group.

"You really are kind, or maybe just soft." Tear quietly noted.

"Oh shut up you cold-" Luke snapped back at Tear's statement.

"My my, what's this? Lovers' quarrel?"

"Colonel Curtiss!" Tear almost hissed, "We don't have that sort of relationship!" Ouch. Luke winced at her statement. Sure they were about as far from being a couple as one could humanly get, but did she have to be so...venomous about it?

"I'm joking. And please, call me Jade. I'm not accustomed to be called by my family name." Jade
turned to face the entrance, "Anise, come here please."

"Yes, Colonel?" The girl Tear had met in Engeve the previous day almost skipped all the way to the man that had just summoned her. Jade leaned down as whispered something in her ear.

"What? No way! I want to stay here with Ion!" She protested after a moment of whispers that, despite all his straining, Luke couldn't make out. Jade let out a sigh.

"Alright then, but it will cost you." Jade extended an open hand.

"Fine," Anise pouted and handed over a large leather pouch that looked too large to be a wallet. "But I want it back later!"

"Of course Anise, are you implying I would keep it?" Even Jade's innocent tone sent chills down Luke's spine. How was it possible to be that...creepy?

"Well then, I will be going on ahead, Anise, Ion, I trust you know where to go?"

"Don't be silly Colonel! Of course we do," Anise replied with a bit of a giggle. "We'll be right behind you! Once we get Ion all fixed up, look at you! You're a mess!" Anise turned her attention to Ion and was trying to wipe some of the dirt off his white robes. "Then we'll head straight there!"

"Alright then," Jade said with a mock bow, "I trust Anise will take good care of Ion, so to our other wonderful friends, I wish you all the best." Jade turned and left. Somehow, good wishes from him felt more like death wishes. Luke couldn't tell if that man took anything seriously, or if he took everything seriously. Either way made him downright scary.

"Ion!" Anise yelled as soon as the Colonel was out of an earshot, "You were using your power again weren't you! You know the doctor said you're not supposed to!"

"I'm sorry Anise." Anise sighed at his apology. Not much she could do about it now, so there really wasn't any point in hounding him on it.

"Did the letter finally arrive?" Ion asked her.

"It did! We should head out after the Colonel. We don't have a whole lot of time to waste after this little detour."

"I'm sorry Anise, but you know that the cheagles along with the Score make up the Foundation of the Order. I had to do something about the trouble they had been causing."

"You never change. Well whatever, we had best hurry up. Come on!" Anise tugged on Ion's sleeve urging him to hurry.

"Wait!" Luke cut in. "No way! We're heading back to the nesting area so these things can give me back what they took." Luke exclaimed a finger pointing at Mieu who was shaken up, but otherwise no worse off for their misadventure.

"That's right!" Ion confirmed, "We should report to the cheagle elder as well."

"If you say so Ion," Anise conceded, "But let's make it quick. I'd rather not find out what happens when we make the Colonel wait."

"Thank you." The cheagle elder offered her gratitude. "I heard what happened from Mieu. You faced great danger on our behalf, for that we are very grateful."
"Certainly, helping the cheagles is a part of Yulia's teachings after all." Ion smiled, accepting her gratitude.

"I'm sorry to say Master Luke," the cheagle elder turned to Luke, "We were not able to find what it is you lost. However, we cheagles do not easily forget our debts. I hear that you also saved Mieu's life. As punishment for causing the fires in the north, Mieu will be exiled from our tribe. As a form of repayment, he shall serve you, Master Luke, for one full cycle of the seasons."

"I want it back, I don't want a pet!" Luke spat bitterly. He couldn't believe this, after all that, it was really gone.

"Try to look on the bright side Luke," Ion offered in consolation, "Cheagles are the sacred beasts of the Order of Lorelei, I'm sure Mieu will be well received by your family."

"And he's cute," Tear mumbled to herself.

"What was that Tear?" Anise inquired.

"N-Nothing." Tear crossed her arms and became very interested in the left wall.

"Master!" Mieu jumped up, once again in possession of the sorcerer's ring. "I'm sorry you didn't get what you were looking for. I haven't had it long but if you want you can have my treasure instead!" The next time Mieu jumped up, he was holding a small piece of gold attached to a golden chain. It was old and worn and had long since stopped shining.

Before anyone had a clue what had happened, Luke snatched it right out of the young cheagle's hands. "That's it! You mean to tell me you had it the entire time?"

"Mieuuuu..." Mieu shrunk back "I'm sorry, I didn't know it was yours..."

"I don't believe this! All that work..." Luke turned around and stormed out of the tree. All that for nothing! Well granted they had saved the cheagles… and the people of Engeve…and had put an end to the food thefts. Damn, sometimes he wished he could just be generally pissed off about something without his conscience tugging at him. Oh well, it was probably for the best anyways, he'd take an annoying conscience over being a total ass.

"Well, I suppose since we've finished up here, we should probably go after him," Tear suggested.

"Yes, we should be going. Thank you very much for everything," Ion added as Mieu hopped up and headed after Luke.

"Master! Wait for me!"

Trekking back out of the forest seemed to take a lot longer than the trip in, possibly because Luke was in such a foul mood. Not only was he still mad from before, but Anise had been taking up all of the Fon Master's attention, so he didn't even have anyone to chat with. So he tromped down the path twirling what Tear could only guess was a locket, around his fingers. Every now and then he'd catch it and look at it, then return to twirling it. At the very least, it was keeping him entertained.

Tear's curiosity finally got the better of her and the next time he caught it, she peaked over his shoulder. It was a locket, just like she thought, but it was broken, and only half the locket was still on the chain. The picture inside was worn, and of a very familiar someone. His hair was a bit shorter and he wasn't quite as tall, but it was most definitely him.
"I can't believe you!" Luke jumped, not realizing she was right behind him. "You mean to tell me you went through all that trouble to get back a picture of yourself! How self-centered can you get?" Tear's yelling drew the attention of the others who were a few paces ahead. "I took you for a lot of things, but a narcissist wasn't one of them. Don't you realize you could have gotten one of us killed? Over that?"

"Seriously?" Anise asked, "You mean you put up all that fuss over a picture of yourself? Man, that's conceited."

"Hey wait!" Luke called after her.

"I don't even want to hear it!" Tear cut him off.

"Please don't fight." Ion said trying to calm them both down, but Tear continued, oblivious to the Fon Master's attempts to settle them down.

"You went and put us all in danger, not to mention deciding to get involved after all the fuss you put up last night about-"

"You should listen to the Fon Master." A strangely familiar voice came from behind them, cutting her off. Tear spun around to see a young man standing in the clearing where they had first run into Ion and started this crazy little adventure.

Tear racked her brain, but couldn't for the life of her figure out why his voice sounded familiar, she had never seen him before in her life. His crimson red hair flowed down the back of his black coat that was gently flapping in the breeze. His bangs were pulled back out of his emerald green eyes, which were narrowed and locked on her, a fact that was making her very uncomfortable. The sword at his side was in a stylized sheathe and he looked ready to draw it at any time. His stance and the way he carried himself made it very clear that he was no amateur.

It was Asch.

Luke could have cried he was so happy to see a familiar face. Though he had only ever seen Asch with his hair pulled back like that a few times, there was no doubt that it was him. There was just something, like a sixth sense Luke couldn't quite explain. It didn't matter how well disguised he was, Luke would always know it was him.

Luke wanted nothing more than to run up to him but the glare he got, then the suspicious looks he then gave the others, especially Tear, was clear as day to him. No associating just yet. Luke just hoped he wouldn't do anything rash. Ironic, coming from him since that was usually his department. Admittedly, he could understand Asch's harsh distrust of Tear. The image of Asch's panicked expression as he and Tear got whisked away was still clearly emblazoned in his mind.

Tear remained silent and stepped back under the intense scrutiny. Whoever this was, he didn't like her at all. The dangerous looks she was getting were nerve-wracking at best, and they made her ill-at-ease. Whatever he had planned for her however, was cut short as Malkuth soldiers burst out of the trees around them. They were completely surrounded.

"Ah there you are." Jade's smooth voice snaked around the clearing. "You took longer than I expected you would."

"Sorry Colonel," Anise apologized, grabbing Ion's sleeve and dragging him towards Jade. "We took a detour to report to the cheagle elder."

"That's alright, I suppose," Jade replied, never taking his eyes off Luke, Tear and Asch in the
"Now, who have we here?" Jade eyed Asch, but Asch didn't dignify him with a response, only a harsher glare. Jade shrugged, if he wanted to be like that, he could go down with the others. "These two were the source of the Seventh Fonons," Jade called out, indicating Luke and Tear, "Soldiers, restrain them!"

"Wait!" Ion interjected, "Please don't do anything to hurt them!"

"Don't worry, we won't kill them… assuming they don't resist," Jade taunted.

Unfortunately for Jade and his plans, Asch intended to do no such thing. The soldiers that had approached him were out cold and the ones trying to grab Luke didn't even see what hit them. The remaining soldiers turned their attention to Asch. Luke wanted to jump in and help but refrained from doing so after yet another glare from Asch. Over the years, Luke had become rather fluent in the language that was Asch's glaring; especially since the results of misunderstanding involved yelling, pain, or usually a combination thereof.

A soldier swung at Asch, and he spun around, their swords meeting in midair. Asch watched the remaining half dozen soldiers out of the corner of his eyes. A second soldier, trying to take advantage of the opening, charged at him. Taking one hand off his sword, Asch pulled out a dagger and met the second blow mid-swing. Both soldiers remained firm, refusing to back down.

The third soldier came from behind, and though Asch knew full well that he was there, he had no way of blocking or evading the strike with the other two still pinning him down from either side. He winced as the sword swung down on his back.

The sound of metal on metal rung through the clearing as everything else fell silent. Luke was shaking slightly at the weight of the soldier's blade on top of his, but managed to throw the soldier back. He now stood back to back with his counterpart. Oh he'd get yelled at later for sure, but he didn't care. This was where he belonged.

"Heh… idiot."

Next thing anyone knew, torrents of water crashed down on the two boys, the fonic arte successfully subduing them both. Sopping wet, they were both hauled to their feet and restrained.

"Now that the two of you have cooled down a bit-" Jade halted mid-sentence as the two boys were placed side by side. "Oh my…now this is interesting."

"What is it Colonel?" Anise looked up at Jade before seeing for herself what had the man's attention. "Oh."

Even Tear couldn't believe her eyes. Water was dripping from two identical sets of bangs into two identical faces. Had they not been wearing opposite colours, she wouldn't have even been able to tell them apart. It then struck Tear as to why the other boy's voice had been so familiar, both in its first statement, and in the soft whisper that had reached her ears before the crashing of water. It had been Luke's voice she heard in him, just as she now saw Luke's eyes in him as he stood defeated for the moment.

Luke on the other hand had a grin from ear to ear, as if that had been the most fun he'd had in days. Despite the fact that he was restrained, he looked more relaxed than since she had met him.

"Take them aboard the Tartarus!" Jade commanded, regrouping his soldiers. "We'll get this all sorted out there," He added more for his own benefit than for anything.

Tear watched as the two boys were hauled out of the forest and aboard the massive landship. She
followed escorted by a half dozen soldiers. But despite the fact that they were being taken captive by the Malkuth military, Tear’s thoughts were stuck on one thing: Luke’s locket, and the boy in it who looked just like him.
Much to Asch's surprise, when they were finally released, it wasn't into one of the cells in the ship's brig. The room in which they were placed looked more like sleeping quarters than any type of containment area. There were four bunks nestled up against the gray walls. Uniforms and other clothes hanging on designated hooks showed that the room was actually in use.

The soldiers that dropped them off here hadn't even locked the door behind them. He had probably figured that with so many soldiers aboard the ship, that any attempt at escape was completely futile. Damn that stuck up, prissy Colonel. If Asch hated anything, it was being believed to be incompetent.

Luke shuffled through the stacks of clothing on one of the bunks before grabbing what he had been searching for: a towel. He tossed it to his older sibling, who gratefully accepted it and used it to dry out his hair as best he could. Luke wrung out his hair and then his coat leaving a nice puddle of water on the floor. He then appropriated a couple of the hooks on the wall where he hung his coat to dry.

"Careful, don't slip there." Luke casually offered as he passed Tear, indicating the water on the floor. He continued past her, hopping up and taking a seat on one of the top bunks, where he was quickly joined by Mieu. The young cheagle hadn't said a word since their capture; the reason why becoming obvious as he curled up on the pillow and promptly fell asleep, exhausted from the day's events.

Tear opened her mouth to say something, but the words wouldn't come. What would she say? What would she ask? She didn't know what she could possibly offer to either of the boys, one who seemed to distrust her so violently, and the other to whom she had been so inconsiderate. So she remained silent.

Asch finished drying his hair with the towel, tossing it back to Luke who made what use of it he could. Asch then proceeded to wring out his jacket as well, adding to the growing puddle of water on the wooden floor.

Luke hopped down from the bunk and caught Asch's coat as Asch tossed it to him, placing it on a hook beside his own.

"You-" Asch said loudly, breaking the tense and considerably awkward silence, his gaze fixed on his little brother, "Have a lot of explaining to do. But-" he said cutting off Luke's impending ramble. His gaze shifted to Tear and turned hard, "Not nearly as much as you do."

"Are we all settled in now?" The r creaked as it opened, allowing four figures to enter. First was the Colonel who had arrested them in the woods, followed by the Fon Master and his Guardian, and then by a regular soldier, presumably there for support in case they decided to make a break for it. Like he would make a difference.

Asch's biggest concern was undoubtedly the Colonel himself. He loathed being underestimated, and therefore assured that he did not make that mistake with his own opponents. There was an air to this man, a dangerous one, and Asch didn't like it. His flawless confidence spoke of the vast gap in their skills and even the confident redhead knew this wasn't an opponent he could overpower. Though Asch was hardly dissuaded; he may not be able to match the man in battle but Asch knew better than to think a sword was the only way to settle a conflict.
"What do you want with us?" Asch snarled.

"Now, now, settle down. You're hardly in a position to be making demands; especially when you're the ones in the wrong here."

"Excuse me?"

"The Seventh Fonon hyperresonance came from the direction of the capital of Kimlasca-Lanvaldear and converged inside Malkuth Territory. That would make these two," Jade stated pointing to Tear and then to Luke who was now standing behind his overprotective counterpart, "Guilty of illegally crossing the border." Jade finished with a grin. "And you," Jade returned his attention to Asch, "You are guilty of resisting arrest as well as aiding criminals sought after by the military."

"Hmph." Asch shrugged off the accusations as if they were completely meaningless to him.

"So what does that all mean exactly?" Luke hesitantly asked.

"Ah yes, we'll get to that in a moment," Jade replied. "First, perhaps you'll do us the honour of introducing yourselves? I'm sure that I'm not the only one wondering." The last statement seemed more like a jibe at the young Fon Master guardian than anything. Anise confirmed it by glaring at the Colonel, her cheeks flushed in anger at being picked on.

"If I recall correctly, it's rude to ask one's name before offering your own." Asch threw back at him.

"My apologies then, I am Colonel Jade Curtiss, 3rd Division, Malkuth Imperial Forces."

Jade Curtiss, huh? Asch knew that name well. Despite his modest rank, he was a force to be feared within the Malkuth Military. Rumours of his prowess, as well as some of his….quirks, were widespread.

Asch sighed, at least he felt a little better about being defeated and captured so easily. "I'm Asch Fon Fabre," Asch finally offered. "This is my twin brother Luke." He added indicating his younger sibling who was positively hovering behind him.

"The sons of Duke Fabre, who married into the Kimlascan royal family? That certainly is interesting… I didn't realize that Duke Fabre had two sons."

"Dukes? Wow…." Anise cooed in the corner. The Fabre boys? Ion sure had good taste in friends.

"These aren't the friendliest times," Jade noted, ignoring Anise's fawning in the corner. "What are you two doing in Malkuth?"

Asch passed off the question with a suspicious look at Tear. "Luke and I are only here because our Seventh Fonons caused a hyperresonance. It wasn't an act of aggression by Duke Fabre." Tear offered, seemingly satisfying Asch who ceased glaring for the time being.

"I'm here looking for him." Asch added nodding towards his sibling.

So he was Luke's brother, Tear realized. That explained a lot, especially why he seemed so hostile towards her. She had broken into their home, and dragged his brother halfway across the world. She was losing her touch. In retrospect, it should have been obvious the two were brothers, but everything had happened so fast, she just hadn't been thinking. But isn't that how it always was? Hindsight is 20/20.
"I believe them," Ion pitched in, breaking off Tear's train of thought. "I don't feel any hostility from them. Why don't we ask for their help?"

"Hmmm," Jade thought on it for a moment. It was a good idea, but there was no saying what was going through his mind at any given time. Jade finally sighed. "Recently several skirmishes have broken out along the border."

"That may be true," Asch cut him off, "and while the intensity of those skirmishes may be increasing, they hardly warrant the presence of a landship such as this one."

"Ah, so you are aware of the situation." Jade realized.

"Of course," Asch replied, insulted. "Tensions between the two countries are almost as high as they were when the Hod War broke out."

"Yes, that's correct. You're quite knowledgeable." Asch scoffed at Jade's taunt. "We're currently headed to Kimlasca under orders from His Majesty, Peony the Ninth, Emperor of Malkuth."

"For what?" Asch demanded suspiciously.

"To declare war?" Tear inquired.

"Hold up! A war's going start?" Luke said panicked. He had remained silent for the entire conversation since, as usual, he hadn't a clue what they were talking about. He knew nothing of border skirmishes or such elevated tensions between the countries. No one ever told him anything anymore and the few things he was told were never explained, so it didn't matter. All the news always went straight to Asch, who seldom bothered to share. Then they chastised him for never knowing anything! It wasn't fair.

"No way! You've got it wrong! We're the ones trying to stop the war!" Anise butted in, indignant of what she saw as an accusation.

"Indeed," Jade continued into an explanation, it was pointless to turn back now, they already knew far too much, so divulging more information at this point really wouldn't matter. "Emperor Peony has proposed an official peace treaty. We bear a letter from him to His Majesty King Ingobert. I assure you, we are on a mission of peace."

"A thousand words will not leave so deep an impression as one deed," Asch rambled off.

"What?" Anise inquired confused.

"I see, you don't trust us." Jade replied tauntingly. "Alright then, I will give you access to all areas of the ship that don't contain military secrets. Feel free to wander and see for yourself our intentions. Then if you are willing, we would ask your assistance."

"No. If your intentions are honourable and true as you say, there isn't a decision to be made. We'll help you out. And if your intentions aren't honourable, I'll simply cut you down myself." Asch added.

Jade chuckled, "If that were to be the case, you would be most welcome to try."

"So Jade's delivering a letter from the king of Malkuth to Uncle, in order to try and stop the war right?" Luke inquired, doing his best to keep up.

"That's correct." Tear confirmed for him.
"So where do we come in?"

"Don't be stupid," Asch answered him, "They're soldiers from an enemy nation. Emissaries of peace or not, they aren't going to be able to waltz right in."

"Oh, I see. By the way, what are you doing way out here Ion?"

"Ah, Emperor Peony requested my aid as a neutral ambassador," Ion provided.

"Master Van was under the impression that you were missing. He's gone looking for you!" Luke was confused; things were getting more and more complicated. He didn't like it at all.

"That's due to matters within the Order of Lorelei."

"If you could provide us with more information, it would be helpful. There's obviously a reason you snuck away, and I'd like to aware of whatever or whoever is planning to get in our way." Asch asked, his words much softer and kinder then when he spoke to Jade.

"A conflict is unfolding between the reformist Fon Master faction, centered around Ion, and the conservative Grand Maestro faction, centered around Grand Maestro Mohs," Jade cut in, only further annoying Asch.

"Yes…" Ion said apprehensively, "Mohs is looking for war. I escaped his custody with the help of the Malkuth military."

"Fon Master!" Tear stood up, surprising everyone by her outburst, "There must be some sort of mistake. Grand Maestro Mohs would never desire such a thing! He prays only for the fulfillment of the Score."

"You're with the Grand Maestro faction Tear?" Anise carefully asked after a moment of silence, "No way…"

"I'm neutral." Tear replied, subdued by the renewed suspicion that she had just earned herself from Asch, "The Score is important, but so are the Fon Master's wishes."

Now Luke was really confused; so many names, positions, and things he didn't understand. All he knew is that he didn't want a war, and neither did Asch. So he would just follow his older sibling’s lead. They had to go back to Baticul to give the letter to Uncle, so either way they were getting home, and that's what mattered. Besides, this way would be much easier than walking the whole way back, and they could help Ion out a bit too. Things looked good to him.

"Regardless of the state of affairs within the Order, this letter must be delivered safely," Ion said once everyone had settled down a bit.

"It will," Asch assured him. "I'll see to that myself."

"For someone who doesn't trust us, you are awfully determined to see us succeed," Jade taunted.

"For someone you've never met before, you seem awfully willing to trust us." Asch threw back.

"Nothing I'm not able to handle, should it take a turn for the worse." Jade smiled creepily.

Suddenly, the entire ship lurched and an alarm blared, effectively putting an end to all discussions. Jade immediately excused himself and left the room, grabbing two soldiers as they ran by, and sending them into the room in his place.
"Master! Master I'm scared!" The young cheagle awoke startled at the sound of the alarm and dove into Luke's arms shaking from head to foot.

"First, shut up. Second, don't worry; it's just the alarm going off." Luke said as he untangled the little fur ball from his top and set it on his shoulder. "If you stay quiet, you can sit right there."

Luke noticed the look of utter confusion on Asch's face. "Long story. Don't ask."

"I wasn't going to." Asch replied, shaking his head.

"Ion, I'm going to go see what's up. You stay here with everyone else." Anise instructed the Fon Master.

"Okay," Ion conceded, "Be careful Anise."

"Of course I will! You don't have to worry about me," Anise said, talking to Luke and Asch rather than Ion, "I shall return safely to your side, so await my return." With that statement, Anise too left the room.

"Oh boy…." Luke sighed.

"Come on," Asch said. "We're going too."

"But wait! If we leave, who's here to protect Ion?" Luke whined.

"We're not leaving; we're just going to see what the fuss is about. We'll be back. Besides, there are other soldiers here to protect him."

"Well then why don't you go, and I'll wait here!"

"Not a chance. The last time I let you out of my sight, you ended up halfway across the world. You are coming with me." Asch stated as he grabbed their jackets from the hook on the wall. He handed over Luke's and then grabbed their swords that had been left for them against the opposite wall. Luke hesitantly stood in the middle of the room after putting on his jacket, that was still pretty wet, and re-equipping his sword. Asch let out an annoyed sigh, grabbed him by the wrist and began to forcefully haul him out of the room.

"Ouch! Okay! Okay! I'm coming! I'm coming!"

Asch let go and turned to face Tear, "You coming or not?"

Tear broke out of the daze she had been in. "Yes. Yes of course! My apologies Fon Master," she said as she hurried after the boys.

"Don't worry about it," Ion replied. "I'll be fine." Tear smiled and left. "I'll wait for your return."

"Large swarm of monsters 20 kilometres ahead. All hands, battle stations! Repeat! All hands, battle stations!" A voice came through a strange pipe sticking out of the wall.

"What's going on here?" Asch demanded.

"A large swarm of griffins are attacking the ship!" Anise told them.

"It's just some monsters right?" Luke couldn't figure out why it was such a big deal. This was hardly a little ship, and not likely to fall victim to some random encounter to a few monsters.
"It's dangerous when monsters act unusually." Tear told him, "Griffins don't normally work in packs."

"Oh no!" Mieu piped up! "Griffins eat cheagles!" Luke cringed at Mieu's voice right in his ear, and was grateful that his eardrum made it through that statement more or less intact.

"Nothing is going to eat you you stupid thing, so stop yelling in my ear!" Luke snapped.

"I'm sorry...." Mieu said after jumping down off Luke's shoulder.

"Bridge! Respond! Bridge!" Luke heard Jade yelling into the same pipe from which the voice had come earlier.

"What? What's going on?"

"They released ligers onto the ship. Based on what we know, we can only assume they are causing trouble at the bridge." Asch responded. "Damn, and it's too dangerous to go outside."

"Some of you have some good sense." A deep voice came from the direction of the stairwell. The man to whom it belonged was easily almost seven feet tall and strongly built, made even larger by his stylized red and black armour. His beard was reminiscent of a lion's mane, befitting of the man known as 'Largo the Black Lion'.

"Well, well," Largo continued, "Jade Curtiss Commander of the Third Division of the Malkuth Imperial Forces...Or maybe I should just call you 'Jade the Necromancer'."

"Jade the Necromancer!" Tear exclaimed, "That's you?"

Jade simply shrugged, "It seems I'm famous." Famous indeed. Rumours of the Necromancer and the way he scavenged corpses after battle had made their way well into Kimlasca.

"I had been hoping for the opportunity to cross blades with you, but now is not the time. I'm here for the Fon Master."

"You aren't laying a hand on Ion!" An outraged Luke charged the man, but didn't even have his sword out before he found himself pinned to the wall, the air completely knocked out of him. Luke froze, the blade of Largo's scythe a scare few hairs away from his neck.

Asch tensed; managing to hold his ground for about three seconds before he couldn't simply stand there anymore. Asch was slightly more successful than Luke had been. Largo had to withdraw his scythe from Luke's throat to block Asch's oncoming strike, leaving Luke a half-collapsed nervous wreck on the floor.

Asch didn't last much longer, taking a sharp blow to the stomach, he too found himself defeated. Laying on the ground gasping for breath, he could see out of the corner of his eye that had at least succeeded. Luke was no longer in danger, and that was what mattered.

Jade, who was never one to miss an opportunity, took full advantage of the distraction the boys had created. "Anise!" He called, the young guardian came running. In passing, she grabbed from him the same pouch she had handed over in Cheagle woods. "I trust you know where to go."

"You got it." She replied, before doubling back towards the room where they had left Ion.

Jade immediately took used what time he had left, to begin casting.
"Fool!" Largo noticed the opening as Jade hadn't quite gathered the fonons he needed for the arte. Largo tossed a small box at Jade. Upon striking him, the box expanded, emitting a rainbow light and fonons that engulfed the fonist, bringing him to his knees.

"A fon slot seal?" Tear couldn't believe it. She had heard of such things, but had never seen any put into action. Their ability to lock a person's fon slots and eliminate their ability to cast fonic artes was to be feared.

"I had hoped to use that to seal the Fon Master's fonic artes; I didn't expect to use it like this." Largo stated.

In that moment when he had dropped his guard, Jade attacked, pulling a spear out of seemingly thin air. Largo reacted, their clash meeting in an explosion of light that left nothing but a large hole in the ship wall, and a rather tussled Necromancer behind.

"Anise will take care of Ion, we should head for the bridge." Jade said, his nerves not the least bit shaken by how close he had just come to finding out how sharp Largo's scythe really was.

"But your artes are sealed," Tear stated concernedly.

"Yes, but this seal will probably take months to undo. Right now, we need to take back the Tartarus. With your hymns and their swords, it should still be possible." Jade said indicating the two boys who were still recovering.

"He-he stabbed him." Luke muttered, unable to get over the events that just occurred before him.


There were far more monsters aboard the Tartarus than any of them had originally expected. Luke had finally managed to regain some of his composure after a few rounds, but the hesitation he was starting to show when delivering a fatal blow was beginning to worry Asch. Hesitating like that would get him killed.

Jade still proved to be somewhat useful, being apt at handling the spear he was able to manifest at will. At best he was on par with the rest of them, a fact that Asch missed no chance to remind him of. Served the stuck up bastard right.

Admittedly, the fon slot seal also put a lot of Asch's nerves at ease. He didn't like having someone like Jade around who was so completely beyond him. He still didn't trust the man any further than he could have thrown him, and knowing he could match blows in the worst case scenario, made Asch feel a lot better.

Getting to the rear entrance of the bridge involved taking a rather tedious route and climbing several ladders that, to be generous, could have used some maintenance. They almost lost Mieu to the wind three times before a rather disgruntled Luke conceded to letting him nestle into his jacket.

When they finally made it to the door, they found it guarded by an Oracle Knight. Tear easily dispatched him using one of her Hymns.

"Wow Tear!" Mieu bounced over to where the soldier was sound asleep. "You're amazing!"

"Alright, we need to take back the bridge." Jade drew their attention to the task at hand, "But it would be wise to have a lookout in case any reinforcements show up."

"I will too," Asch added.

"No," Luke argued, "You go with them. They'll need your sword anyways."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm just the lookout, all I have to do is yell if anything shows up right? I mean this thing can hit undiscovered octaves, we'll be fine." Luke said with a grin as he pointed towards Mieu.

"Okay, we'll be right back, yell if there's trouble."

Luke stood alone on the deck, watching for signs of movement but nothing caught his attention. The thick doors to the bridge blocked any sounds from within, leaving Luke with no idea how the others were making out, or how much longer they would be in there.

"So why do you think he's out like that?" Luke asked out of curiosity, kneeling down beside the unconscious soldier as boredom got the better of him.

"It's because Tear's fonic hymns use the Seventh Fonon!" Mieu replied. Luke fought back the urge to injure the young cheagle; he was only answering his question after all. But that voice was so damn annoying!

"The Seventh Fonon huh? That's been mentioned a few times now...is that the fonon of sound?"

"That's right! It was just discovered! The Seventh Fonon is really special! See...it can even do this!" Mieu began bouncing up and down on the fallen soldier's chest showing that he was out cold.

"Okay okay enough!" Luke reprimanded the creature, "I really don't think you should be doing that..."

The soldier roused, causing Luke to jump back in shock. Luke drew his sword, barely blocking as the soldier wasted no time attacking the intruder. Luke parried the attack and swung, staying his hand at the last second. This was a person! He couldn't do this!

Seeing him hesitate, the Oracle Knight took the chance and threw him to the ground. Luke could only watch as the sword came down on his head.

Was this how it was going to end? Would this be how he would die? He couldn't. He didn't want to die. He didn't want to be alone! He didn't have anyone else. He needed to stay! But where did these feelings come from? One can't be lonely when dead. No. None of that mattered. He couldn't leave, he'd never be forgiven.

He didn't want to be alone again.

The next thing Luke knew, his sword was through the soldier, the blood running down the blade dripping at his feet. He dropped his sword, his hands shaking uncontrollably. Luke fell to his knees.

"What going on?" Asch came running out the door followed by Jade and Tear.

"I-I killed him..." Luke stuttered, oblivious to his surroundings, or to his brother's hand that was now resting on his shoulder.

"Luke!" Asch shook him, "Snap out of it! This isn't the time!"
"I-I….I killed him" Luke stuttered.

"Luke!" Tear called.

"Watch it!" Asch managed to haul Luke out of the way as a huge liger pounced. Tear jumped in, trying to lure the liger away but the liger was not deterred by any of their schemes. It took one more lunge at Asch and look before getting around behind them, blocking their escape.

"You won't escape!"

The young girl dropped down from a griffin, standing in such a way as to block the door to the bridge. Her soft pink hair and the doll that she clutched offset the anger in her matching pink eyes.

"You!" She yelled, the unknown levels of fury buried in her voice. "I finally found you! You killed mommy!"

"What are you talking about?" Tear demanded, confused at the young girl's statement.

"You broke into mommy's home, and then you killed her! Now I'll make you pay! I'll kill you all for what you did to mommy!"

"Easy there, little one." A second voice came from the side lines.

"I'm not a child!" The girl yelled back, pouting and stomping her foot on the ground.

"Child or not, Arietta, aren't we forgetting orders? We have custody of Ion now, they are not to be killed."

"It's not fair! They should die for what they did!"

"Well," the second God-general said as she brushed some of her violet hair out of her face, "no orders were given on their condition, so by all means have all the fun you want. Just don't kill them."

Arietta didn't take her comrade up on her suggestion however, instead opting to storm off into the bridge, taking out her frustrations on the few unfortunate soldiers within that were still breathing.

A squad of Oracle knights took the place vacated by Arietta's liger.

"Lock them up!" A third voice arose, this time coming from a blonde also bearing the uniform of a God-General. Though she was shorter than her remaining companion, she clearly had more authority and immediately took command of the confused Oracle knights.

Asch let go of Luke, who was completely useless for the time being, his attention on the oncoming Oracle Knights. Two of them had fallen to his blade when he heard the voice come from behind him.

"Stop!" Asch turned to see the violet-haired God-General with her long blade drawn, inches away from Luke's throat. He froze. "Now," she continued with a maleficent grin. "No more resisting."

Asch dropped his blade, and was immediately restrained. His heart stopped as, despite her implicit promise, she raised her blade over Luke. Asch cringed and looked away, his heart still not beating.

Rather than bring her blade down on the young noble, she turned her blade, using the hilt to knock him out. She handed him over to a couple nearby knights, who took him and his relieved brother
away; followed closely by Tear and Jade, who had also been restrained.

"So the second-in-command herself is overseeing this mission?" She said as she sheathed her blade.

"Back to your station." The blonde ordered.

"Hey, my wing is already cleared, Legretta."

"Then make yourself useful on the bridge. And do something about Arietta. We can't have her destroying the controls."

"Yes ma'am," she conceded, not bothering to question why Legretta herself didn't undertake the task. She also didn't point out that one of them ought to be watching the prisoners. If she knew anything, it was they weren't going to stay captive for long.

As she headed towards the bridge, she stopped and was staring out into the distance.

"What's the matter Cantabile?"

"Nothing…" Cantabile responded still distracted, her gaze fixed on that single space. She thought…no. It couldn't be. It was nothing. Nothing at all.
"Do you suppose he's really asleep?" Tear asked Jade as she cautiously eyed Asch who was leaning against the wall of their cell with his eyes closed. He hadn't opened them in awhile and his breathing has become soft and rhythmic. Tear approached him to get a closer look, but as soon as she was within a foot of him, he opened his eyes. He didn't say a word, simply watching her, wondering what she wanted. Slightly embarrassed, she apologetically backed off. Asch glanced over at his sibling who was still out cold on the bed beside him, and once again closed his eyes.

Did Tear imagine it or was his gaze warmer than it had been before?

"Oh I imagine so," Jade replied once Tear had returned to the other end of the cell where he was patiently awaiting for Luke to regain consciousness.

"What makes you so sure?" Tear asked, still watching the slumbering boys. They really were identical; she just couldn't get over it. She had just begun to be able to tell them apart when awake. Asch was harder than Luke was; that was the only way she knew how to describe it. When he was asleep though, Asch's hardness and suspicion melted away, and they were both so peaceful, and so very alike.

"I would think it was rather obvious," Jade commented, pushing his glasses back up with his forefinger, "the boy must be exhausted."

"Why do you say that?" Tear wondered, made only more curious by Jade's taunt.

"Let me ask you this Tear, how long has it been since you and Luke disappeared from Baticul?"

"Well," Tear thought on it a moment. To be honest she wasn't too sure. There was no saying how long they had been out in Tataroo Valley before they had awoken. "At least two days, probably no more than three."

"And he met up with you in the Cheagle Woods. Have you ever heard of anyone making the journey from Baticul to Engeve in so short a time?"

"No, I haven't," Tear replied finally realizing what the Colonel was getting at.

"Neither have I. I highly doubt that he's slept much, if at all, to have made such a journey in so short a time. And exhausted several steeds in the process no doubt." Jade replied, his studious gaze never leaving the two boys.

"So what do you think?" Tear finally asked vaguely indicating the slumbering siblings.

"I think a great deal about many things, you're going to have to be more specific then that." Jade teased, knowing full well what she had meant.

"About them..." Tear said sheepishly.

"Oh I don't know," Jade said after a moment of silence, "they certainly are a lively pair. If I had to take my pick, I'd say Asch is the older one."

Tear rolled her eyes as Jade completely dodged her question. She didn't push the issue further. Whatever it was about them that held the Colonel's attention, he obviously didn't feel like divulging.
Asch reached up and held his throbbing head, the motion drawing the attention of both Jade and Tear who were now quietly waiting for the redheads to awaken. Luke also shuffled uncomfortably in his sleep, curling up and grasping at his head.

Now that was interesting. Jade watched the two, patiently awaiting Luke to come to. They really didn't have much time; action had to be taken soon. The two boys had proved to be an interesting enough study to keep his apprehension at bay for the time being, but there was no way of testing his theories just yet.

Luke slowly opened his eyes and sat up with a start. "...where-" Luke confusedly looked around the room, his nerves noticeably settling when his eyes met Asch. Luke reached up cradling his still aching head, fingering the lump that was partially the cause.

"Thank goodness," Tear let out a sigh of relief as Luke woke up. His continued state of unresponsiveness was beginning to worry her.

"A cabin aboard the Tartarus." Asch replied as Luke stood up out of the bed. Luke managed a weak smile at his sibling as he tried to remember the chain of events that led him to the place where he'd awoken, and then it all came crashing down on him.

"I-" but Luke hadn't gotten the other two words out before a blow sent him crashing to the ground. Luke glared back up at his assailant, whose hand was still clenched in a fist, his emerald green eyes narrow with fury.

"What the hell did you think you were doing up there?" Asch yelled, "You could have been killed!"

"What was I supposed to do?"

"Oh I don't know, fight back maybe?"

"In case you didn't notice, those weren't monsters, those were people!"

"And what's your point? It doesn't make much difference what the hell killed you once you're dead!"

"But! Those were people…. I killed someone! These are human lives!" Luke yelled back on the verge of tears.

"So what? Its okay if they just kill you then? Stop and think for a second! If you think your life is that worthless, fine, but stop being so damn self-centered and think about the people around you who still need you!"

Luke fell silent and looked away, unable to face Asch. He knew Asch was right, but was it really kill or be killed? He didn't want to have to take anyone's life. Sure they might be his enemy... but they were someone's son, someone's brother or sister... they had families and people that cared about them too! He didn't want to kill. Not now, not ever. "But…" he finally spoke up, "They're people."

Asch let out a frustrated sigh. It was too damn hard to stay mad at him when he was like that. Sometimes he wondered if Luke knew and did it on purpose. No, Luke was genuinely bothered, and if he knew his brother, Luke was far more bothered than he was letting on.

"At the same time, if we fail, then a war will start, and more people will die. Things aren't as
simple as not fighting and no one will get hurt." Asch said painfully. He wished, if only for Luke's sake, that the world really was that simple, and he missed the days when he believed it as such. No matter how much he wished for it, the reality was that the world wasn't so kind and as hard as it was going to be on his naïve little brother, it was the reality that they all had to deal with.

"He's right," Tear added. "On the battlefield, they won't hesitate to kill you if you don't kill them first. There is no good or evil, just life or death. And it's not just here. Even in everyday life, one could be attacked by monsters or bandits. Those who lack strength do things like hire mercenaries, travel together, or travel by coach. Those with the strength to fight do. Sometimes even children." Asch looked away. "People do what they must in order to survive."

"As much as I hate to interrupt such a magnificent opportunity for reflection on the meaning of life," Jade broke the restless silence that had settled over them, "But now that Luke has rejoined us in the land of the living, I'd like to discuss getting out of here, and getting Ion back."

"Ion?" Luke finally stood up off the ground, his worried gaze never leaving the colonel, "What happened to Ion?"

"According to the Oracle Knights we overheard, they took Ion away." Tear answered.

"The problem is that we don't have any idea where they took him." Asch added, pointing out the obvious problem.

Ion was captured. That fact drew Luke away from his moral dilemma, and gave him a problem to focus on. Not that it made him feel any better. He had abandoned Ion after promising to protect him. Luke wanted to save Ion and keep his promise. After all, he'd never had a friend before. "We have to save Ion! It's-I should have stayed with him, it's my fault he was captured" Luke declared.

"Don't be stupid, it's hardly your fault he was captured," Asch argued. "Besides, what would you have done if you had stayed? They probably would have just killed you."

"No, Anise would have tried to escape with Ion. If Ion was captured, then she likely failed in that regard. Either way, Ion would no longer have been in that room for you to attempt to protect." Jade also divulged.

"Do you think Anise is okay?" Tear asked.

"Oh I imagine so. I can't see anything happening to her. She is rather stubborn that way."

"So then what's the plan?" Asch asked; more then ready to get out of this score-forsaken place.

"Well, they should be returning soon, so the most logical plan of action would be to ambush them as they return and get back Ion."

"Okay then, so how are we getting out of here?"

"Ahh, leave that little detail to me." Jade grinned, taking what looked like a small fon-machine out of his pocket.

"Do I want to know what you're planning to do with that?" Asch asked one eyebrow arched.

"Let's find out," Jade replied, tossing the small machine over his shoulder. As soon as it hit the bars, it burst into a bright light and vanished, taking the cell's bars with it.

"Bastard," Asch spat as Jade made a run for one of the communication devices on the wall opposite
their cell.

Jade ignored Asch's comment, instead yelling a series of commands into the device. What, did he actually think that there was someone left alive on the bridge to obey whatever orders he was giving? Nothing was going to come out of that. Asch only scowled at being proven wrong as, no sooner had he finished the command, then the entire ship seemed to shut down, from the dim lights that lit the halls to the ships engines that fell silent.

"I've initiated an emergency shutdown system. It should take them awhile to get things back up and running."

"So where do we head from here?" Tear asked.

"To the port hatch. It's the only one that will open manually."

"Then let's get going before anyone notices we've escaped," Asch stated.

"But... that means more fighting." Luke hesitantly pointed out.

"It can't be helped." Tear said matter-of-factly.

"But-!"

"Enough!" Asch cut in, "You want to save Ion but you don't want to fight. Has it crossed your mind that nothing that convenient exists in the real world? To rescue Ion, means fighting and killing the people that took him, and that have taken control of the Tartarus. Because if you don't kill them, they will kill you. There's no in between, no halfway; either you fight and kill to survive, or you die. And if you choose to die..." Asch trailed off, no one but Luke hearing the last whisper as they slowly made their way to the exit.

"...I'll never forgive you."

Then sun was just beginning to set as the four escapees opened the hatch on the port side of the Tartarus, whose engines still remained silent. They still had time. Luke found it hard to believe that just that morning, he and Tear had been heading up to the Cheagle woods to get back his locket. If he had known... Oh who was he kidding, he would still have gone. As much as he complained about how embarrassing it was to be carrying around jewellery, it really was one of his greatest treasures, and he couldn't imagine leaving it behind.

"Get ready, here they come," Jade whispered.

The first thing Luke saw was Ion. He wasn't forcefully restrained or bound, but he was surrounded by an escort of about a dozen Oracle Knights. Beside him stood the pink-haired God-General, Arietta, accompanied by the same large liger they had seen near the bridge. A couple feet ahead of them stood the blonde God-General with another half-dozen soldiers or so.

"Can I help? Can I help?" Mieu bounced behind the group. Without even turning around, Asch grabbed Mieu mid bounce and rather forcefully put him back on the ground.

"Luke, make it be quiet."

"Be quiet," Luke dutifully ordered, "You'll give us away." He added, also keeping his eye on the approaching group. They were leery as they approached the ship, but as expected they proceeded straight to the hatch.
"Open the hatch!" The command came from the blonde.

"Yes Major Legretta!" Two Oracle Knights immediately obeyed the command, releasing the switch that opened the hatch.

Once the hatch was open, everything happened so fast, Luke had a hard time following. Jade was the first one out, spear in hand, coming down on Legretta. Legretta looked up at her assailant, but something was wrong. There was no look of shock or worry or anything of the like on her face. Rather, a grin, as if she had already achieved her victory.

A huge blue bird swooped in, sending Jade crashing to the ground. Asch and Tear jumped out of the hatch and were swarmed by several of the Oracle Knights.

"Damn that Cantabile for being right," Legretta muttered to herself before calling out. "Arietta!"

"Yes!" The young God-General replied needing no further instruction, "Come on Ion! We have to go now."

"No!" Jade attempted to get closer to Arietta but was cut short by a shot that just barely missed his foot.

"Not so fast Necromancer. You still have me to contend with." Legretta wasted no time pushing Jade back away from Ion who was being helped onto the liger's back. Jade took up the challenge, drawing both her attention, and her guns, away from the others. He could only hope they were bright enough to recognize the opportunity when they saw it.

Luke could only watch as the chaos unfolded before him. Ion was being taken away, everyone was fighting for their lives and he wasn't doing anything. Tear kept trying to use her hymns, but the Oracle Knights kept attacking her, not leaving her enough time to cast. Jade was completely caught up in surviving Legretta's onslaught while Asch was making every possible attempt to free himself and get to Ion, failing as soldier after soldier took him on.

One of the soldiers decided to take advantage of the fact that Luke was neither attacking nor defending, but was stopped mid-strike by Asch who had managed to fall back in time. It was like a dream; a reality in which he didn't belong. Nothing seemed real. Not the sword that Asch had plunged into the attacking knight, not the blood that pooled at his feet along with the crumpled soldier, not even Ion who was now almost out of sight, taken away by Arietta and her liger.

Asch took a moment to look over his shoulder. His gaze met Luke's. Though it was only for a second, time seemed to stop. Luke looked back, finding in his reflection, a piece of reality he could grasp a hold of.

He was being a burden. Everyone else was fighting so hard, trying to get Ion back, and yet here he was, the one who wanted to rescue Ion the most, doing nothing. No, doing worse than nothing. Not only was he doing nothing to help, but he was something else that they had to worry about. He couldn't even hold his own.

The clash of metal as Luke's sword met that of the Oracle Knight's was drowned out by the sound of battle around him, but he still felt the weight of the soldier under his blade. He couldn't afford to be a burden now. Two more soldiers had joined the fray around him he looked to his sibling for help but Asch was surrounded. Tear had managed to free herself from the fray but still had one knight to contend with, and Jade was doing a surprisingly good job keeping Legretta occupied.

One hit, then another, and another. One was disarmed, and then two of them were. As long as he
stopped them, then maybe they wouldn't have to join the growing number of their lifeless companions littering the earth.

"Luke!" He heard the distracted Asch calling, still surrounded by his three opponents, "What are you doing? Finish them off!"

"But-"

One of the soldiers that Luke had disarmed, picking up a stray sword, had renewed his attack on the Kimlascan noble.

"Luke! Watch out!" Without even thinking, Tear jumped in front of Luke. She didn't know what had possessed her to do so. She hadn't been thinking. She promised she'd bring him home, and she had every intention of fulfilling that promise. In that brief moment of time, that was all that mattered.

"Tear!" The young melodist fell to her knees grasping the gash in her shoulder where the blade had landed. Luke stood frozen on the spot, his ineptitude in itself was bad enough, but to have it be the cause of suffering in his friends was downright unbearable.

Damn it, now Tear was hurt. Things were going from bad to worse. Asch was catching a glance over in Luke's direction whenever he could, and had caught the series of events. Luke was managing to hold up a weak defence, but he was beyond his breaking point, he wasn't going to last much longer, no matter how determined he was to protect his injured companion. It was all Asch could do to defend against the three on his tail.

From the corner of his eye, Asch saw one of the knights disarm Luke, its blade coming down on him. Distracted, he suddenly found himself under the descending blade of his own opponent.

The familiar sound of metal on metal sounded in the clearing and an enemy sword went flying through the air, sticking in the ground next to the lifeless body of its former wielder. The blond offered his hand to the redhead and helped him back to his feet. "Are you okay Luke?"

Blood trickled down Asch's arm where he hadn't quite managed to dodge the blow. He impaled his foe and swung around sending the lifeless body crashing into the other two knights who stumbled back giving him sometime to recover.

"G-Guy!" Asch heard Luke say in surprise at finding his best friend here of all places.

"It's good to see you're alright." Guy spun around, impaling the last soldier. Before he could return his attention to his best friend, another squadron of soldiers came out of the Tartarus. "There's no end to this!" A frustrated Guy yelled out after a few more minutes of fending off soldiers.

Then a soft melody came from behind them, slowly increasing in volumes until its entrancing melody started to subdue the attackers, including Legretta.

"Now!" Jade called as Legretta had become too drowsy to maintain her onslaught, subdued by Tear's fonic hymn. "We need to escape!"

"But what about rescuing Ion?"

"If we don't back down now, there won't be anyone left to rescue Ion," Jade pointed out.

"He's right, let's go! Come on Luke!" Guy called back to his friend.
Luke carefully helped Tear to her feet and led her after the others, away from the battlefield, the whole time unable to look her in the eye.

Once they were a safe distance from the Tartarus, everyone stopped to catch their breath. Well, everyone but Jade. Despite the ordeal they had just been through, he was as calm and collected as if he had just spent the day relaxing aboard the Tartarus. Once everyone else had regained their composure, their attention turned to the unexpected addition to their group.

The blond, Guy, as Luke had called him, was also observing them. His blue eyes weren't nearly as cold and suspicious as Asch's had been when they had met. He wore a smile, standing just a bit taller than the twins, and looking a few years older than them too. His orange vest and beige top stood out against the green bushes and trees that lined the clearing where they were taking shelter. Tear followed his gaze as it passed from her, to Jade, and then-

"You know you could have waited before taking off like that!" Guy yelled as soon as his eyes met Asch. "The rest of us were just as worried too, you know!" Asch cringed at Guy's steadily increasing volume. Asch cringed. Guy made Asch cringe. There are many things one only sees once in a lifetime, and that had just been one of them.

But in a moment, that apprehension was gone, replaced by scoff as Asch averted his gaze, pretending not to care in the least.

"Um…" Tear hesitantly interrupted, "I don't mean to be rude but…"

"Oh I'm sorry!" Guy smiled, the anger he had just displayed gone in a flash, "I haven't introduced myself have I? My name's Guy. I'm Luke's servant. I was sent by Duke Fabre to look for him after he disappeared from the manor."

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Tear." Tear approached Guy and offered her hand in greeting. As she stepped closer, Guy took a step back. Weird. She took another step, and another, and he kept moving back. Finally, she took a big step forward.

"Gyah!" Guy cried outright before diving behind Luke for protection. Now Tear was just confused.

"Sorry Tear," Luke apologized, a huge smirk on his face, "Guy doesn't like women."

"I'd say it looks more like a phobia." Jade noted amusedly.

"I'd say it looks pathetic" Asch looked down on the shaking mess that Guy had become, taking great pleasure in making him jump ten feet in the air just by placing his hand on Guy's shoulder. It was too easy, especially when he was such a nervous wreck.

"Hey!" Guy yelled at Asch after recovering from the heart failure Asch's little game always sent him into.

"Oh grow up and get over it, it's just a female. You're so pathetic."

"Oh come on, what kind of person picks on a guy when he's down like that. Besides, what's with you always sneaking up on me from behind? What kind of underhanded tactic is that?"

"A good one. And if you knew the first thing about swordsmanship, you'd know that."

Luke stifled a small laugh as the two continued to argue, the familiarity calming his rattled nerves. However, it did nothing about the growing pit in the bottom of his stomach.
"Can we stop here?" Luke hesitantly asked. They had been walking for a good hour and the sun was just starting to come down in the sky.

"There's still at least another couple hours of daylight, we should get as far as we can before nightfall." Asch replied.

"Yeah but..." Luke eyed Tear. She still hadn't recovered from their previous encounter, and she was very quickly tiring, despite her best efforts to hide it.

"Oh come on," Guy butt in, also noticing her depleting energy, "Let's stop here and rest. Tear's still hurt, and regardless we won't be getting there until tomorrow, why not stop for now."

"We need to put as much distance between us and them as we can." Asch looked to Jade for support. For all he disliked the man, he at least had some sense and should agree with him.

"I have no objections to stopping here." Jade simply shrugged. Asch took it back. He loathed the senseless bastard.

It didn't take them long to set up a makeshift camp. None of them had any extensive supplies, even Guy who hadn't his bags taken didn't have much. He made up for the lack by catching something in the nearby trees they could cook for supper. They wouldn't have any blankets or shelter to speak of, and the sun was setting quickly.

Tear watched them cook supper, Luke adamantly refusing her assistance when she offered it. Every time she attempted to do something, the redhead had it out of her hands before she could blink. He insisted she rest, she was the one injured after all, he could handle this much... the whole time refusing to look her in the eyes. Was he angry with her? Tear was left with little to do but contemplate Luke's strange behaviour as they all hustled about, doing their best to prepare for the upcoming night.

Asch and Luke had both gone searching for firewood in the standing of trees nearby, a difficult task in the growing darkness. They seemed to be doing a good enough job of it though, but for some reason Asch only ever came back with half the load Luke carried. It intrigued her for a moment until the firelight caught her a glimpse of his left arm. The sleeve was stained, and Tear recalled the injury. Luke had almost incurred a similar one, but Guy had been there to protect him. Asch hadn't been quite so fortunate.

"Asch," Tear called and the redhead came over. Luke hovered until Asch shooed him off for the last batch of wood. Tear couldn't help but smile at his eagerness, until his recent behaviour returned to mind.

"How are you feeling?" Asch asked, genuine concern in his voice. Tear's eyes met his and for the first time his gaze didn't make her nervous. Perhaps it was that she'd saved his sibling, but he seemed slightly more trusting of her. At the very least, he didn't look like he was ready to attack her at the first given opportunity to do so. It was some progress.

"I'm fine, really." She replied.

"You're as bad a liar as Luke is," Asch shot back.

"He must get it from you then," she said, putting her hand over his injured arm. Asch tried to jerk away but her other hand grabbed his wrist. A second later the gash on his arm had vanished, replaced by the warmth of fonons as they diffused into his skin.
"A Seventh Fonist," Asch mused, "That explains a lot."

"Don't lie, you knew as much."

"Yes and you should be saving your strength to tend to your own injuries," Asch replied.

"I'll be well enough to tend to them in the morning," Tear stated.

"You're as stubborn as he is too, no wonder you get along."

"W-What are you talking about?" Tear demanded.


Watching him walk away, Tear was confused as ever. As hard as it was to understand Luke sometimes, Asch was a complete enigma. She had no idea what to make of him. Though he'd stopped regarding her with hatred, she still didn't know a thing about him, and that bothered her. He protected and guarded Luke with an eagerness that was frightening, but other than that she had no window into this person travelling with her.

"I'll take the first watch," Asch offered, putting down the final remnants of his make-shift supper. "I'll wake you up when it's your turn." He said to Jade.

"But at my age, it's important that I get a full night's sleep." Jade taunted.

Tear watched Asch scoff, firing a reply quicker than her wit would have allowed as he continued his banter with the Colonel. The boy who playfully taunted his little brother with a warmth he didn't know he betrayed or the boy who coldly shut himself off from the rest of the world. Which one was the real Asch, she wondered.

"Hey…Tear?" Luke sat down beside his companion tuning out the others behind them. The soft light of the fire betrayed just how tired Tear really was. Her eyes rose to meet him at the sound of his voice, but the motion brought to light the bright red crusted gash across her shoulder. Luke looked away, he couldn't stand to see her hurt, to see how worn out she was… knowing it was his fault, his ineptitude that had caused this. He didn't even deserve to talk to her, but there was something very important he had to do before his conscience outright smothered him.

"I'm sorry." Tear's voice surprised Luke, the words he wanted to offer her coming from her own mouth.

"What are you apologizing for? You're the one who got hurt because of me. I should be the one apologizing." Luke said softly.

"Don't be sorry," Tear's response surprised the apologetic Luke. "I knew you were a civilian, but I guess I didn't really realize what that meant. Asch seemed fine with everything so I assumed you would be as well; but it wasn't right for me to think that just because you look alike, that you would have had the same experiences. I'm... I'm truly sorry."

"Please don't apologize; you got hurt because of me. It's not right for you to be saying you're sorry to me." Luke's objection surprised Tear. Wasn't he upset with her all this time? Angry at her for not being considerate of his feelings and for not being willing to understand his perspective? He was right to be. The responsibility fell on her shoulders. Why did he object to her accepting it? She was the soldier, and it was her job to protect civilians. Her getting hurt was nothing more than proof of her lack of strength. She looked over at him, his chin resting on the knees he had his arms wrapped
around. She gently put her hand on his shoulder and smiled. "Let's get some rest for tomorrow."

"Okay," he returned, forcing on a smile for her sake that was transparent at best.

Can't sleep?" Asch said seemingly into the darkness that their campfire kept at bay. Luke sat up, nodding solemnly. Without even turning to look, Asch motioned for Luke to come and take the place beside him.

The two sat in silence for a few moments, sitting back against a log staring out into the night. It was Asch who finally broke the silence with a soft sigh.

"I still remember." He said softly, looking up at the stars, "she had blue eyes."

Luke looked curiously at his sibling but didn't say a word. Asch met his gaze with a smile and continued to speak softly, perhaps as not to wake the others who were asleep behind them, or perhaps because to say it louder made it all the more real.

"I would have been 10. It was in the Inista Marsh, a group of bandits attacked me. I ended up killing all three of them." Asch went silent for awhile. Luke refrained from asking the tirade of questions that assaulted him, not the least of which being what on earth Asch had been doing alone in Inista Marsh at the age of ten. He didn't ask. This was something Asch had never spoken of before, not even to him.

"I didn't think much of it at first, they would have killed me had I not fought back. I remember...there was so much blood. I can still see her, the way she looked at me before she died, before I killed her." Asch trailed off.

"Asch?"

Asch stood alone in his doorway. Without a word, Asch walked in, dragging behind him his blue comforter.

"Asch what is it?" Still no answer.

Asch pulled the large stuffed animals off the bed and spread his comforter over the bed before crawling into bed with his younger sibling. The bed was just barely big enough for both of them.

"Asch? What's the matter?"

"Just...go to sleep."

Luke lay back down, dismissing Asch's strange behaviour from his mind, and allowed himself to slip back into a world of dreams.

Asch lay awake for a few more moments, unable to bring himself to close his eyes. He knew what would come if he did. Blood, pain, death, and those same blue eyes. But why? It had been over a year now. Why did it still haunt him like it was yesterday?

Luke rolled over, grabbing Asch's arm and laying his head on Asch's shoulder. Luke cuddled closer and Asch was grateful.

It was the only thing that stopped the shaking.
Asch?

Asch woke from the daze he was in to find the same comforting warmth on his arm. Luke moved his hand off Asch's arm when Asch returned his soft smile. "No. It's nothing."

"Can- Can I ask you something?"

"Hm? What is it?"

"How did you deal with it? How...how did you go on...knowing...knowing what you did?"

This time it was Asch's hand that came to rest on his brother's arm. "Because I had a reason to go on. I had something I still had to do. I still had to come home." He offered with a soft smile that masked volumes of sorrow.


"Do what?"

"I'll fight. I won't be a burden anymore. And if it means I have to kill to survive...then...then I will."

"You don't have to push yourself. We have more than enough fighting capacity to handle the majority if things we run into..." Asch trailed off as Luke softly shook his head.

"I don't want to hurt anyone anymore." Luke said softly glancing behind him at Tear. "Do you think she'll be okay?" He asked apprehensively.

"She'll be fine. She's a seventh fonist after all. That injury isn't that bad. Once she gets some rest, she'll be more than capable of healing it on her own." Asch stopped for a moment, debating whether he wanted to continue. He let out a sigh. "Luke, there's something we need to talk about."

"What's that?" Luke asked, still keeping his voice down.

"About what happened back at the manor."

"You mean about that hyper...resonance...thing?"

Asch couldn't resist smile at that. "Yeah, that right."

"Yeah...I've been meaning to ask about that. What exactly is a hyperresonance anyway?"

"It's a reaction that happens when the Seventh Fonons of two Seventh Fonists interact. It's a very dangerous occurrence that normally happens under very special circumstances." Asch explained solemnly.

"What do you mean by normally?"

"I mean normally, because it's supposed to take two Seventh Fonists to occur. But you and I... we can cause one on our own."


"I don't know why..." Asch continued, staring at his hand, "All I know is that it's a power we both have, and that's it dangerous."
"So you can cause one of those hyperresonance by yourself?"

"That's right, and so can you."

"Me? Are you sure? I mean, this is the first I've heard of any of this. Why wouldn't anyone tell me?"

"To be honest, I don't think anyone thought you could, but more important than that, it's something that's really dangerous, so…"

"No one trusted me." Luke said solemnly.

"No. It's a burden I was hoping you wouldn't have to bear. A power like this could easily be used as a weapon. A hyperresonance breaks down anything around it into the fonons that compose it. It's destructive, and that destruction is absolute. If you wanted to, you could wipe out an army in seconds."

"Why would I-"

"I'm not saying you would," Asch replied. "I'm just saying that's the kind of potential a hyperresonance has as a weapon. That's why, if anyone knew we could do this, we'd be constantly trying to escape people who want to use it for their own ends."

"So that's why…"

"That's why I've never told you about it. I really hoped that you wouldn't be dragged into this mess. I'd hoped that maybe you didn't have the same power, but then again I guess it isn't much surprise."

"I guess you're right," Luke agreed. He was a little angry at the fact Asch had never said anything, but more than upset, he felt for Asch who had carried this burden alone for so long.

"If that's the case, why are you going to teach me?" Luke asked.

"Because as dangerous as it is, it's much more dangerous if you can't control it."

Luke moved so he was sitting right beside Asch, his head leaning against his twin's shoulder. "Asch?"

"Hm?"

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet, it's going to be a lot of work... and I can't exactly have you end up blown halfway across the world again. It was a pain to track you down, you know that?" But Luke never answered; sound asleep on Asch's shoulder. Asch smiled.

Asch placed his hand gently on his brother's forearm and frowned. Despite Luke's resolve, his comforting gesture was the only thing that stopped the shaking.
"Whoa…check it out!" Luke ran awestruck through the gates of the citadel known as St. Binah. The small city's walls almost shone in the mid morning light, providing structure and protection to its populace who were already well about their daily business. Small stands lined the cobblestone streets and the flowers that grew along the roads and in the gardens made the whole city come alive in a way Baticul never could.

"Luke! Slow down and wait for the rest of us!" Tear called after him.

Luke let out a sigh for being reprimanded by Tear yet again this morning. She had been on his case all morning since he hadn't been looking where he was going and ended up spilling her water all over her. He had apologized, and had even given her his water skin in exchange. What more did she want? Luke waited for the others to catch up.

"I would have thought you'd have learned your lesson when those monsters ambushed you this morning. Stay with the rest of us!" Tear continued her reprimand once they were all safely within the city.

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Of course she had to bring that up. Just because he thought he saw something, ran ahead, and ended up under attack by a wandering pack of ligers; Tear was going to be on his case for the rest of the week. And what made it that much worse-

"Yeah well, you don't see Asch running off like that." Luke cringed as the words came out of her mouth. Did she think that all she had to do to get him to listen was compare him to Asch? Sure Asch had some decent traits but it's not like he was perfect either. Just because they were twins, didn't mean that they wanted to be identical. He had his own brain and intended to use it thank you very much.

"So why the huge stone walls?" Luke inquired of Guy, completely ignoring Tear before he said something he'd regret. "Something like that would have been useful in Engeve to keep bandits and monsters out."

"Well, St. Binah is a citadel, sort of like a miniature military headquarters," Guy explained. "The stone walls are here since St. Binah is a more likely target of an enemy military strike. Also, stone walls would be impractical in a place like Engeve where access to the fields outside of town is important."

"And speaking of military headquarters," Jade interjected, "I'm heading over there now to see if I can get any information on Ion or Anise."

"Anise? Why would the military here know anything about Anise?" Luke asked confusedly. The little Fon Master Guardian was becoming more and more interesting by the second.

"St. Binah is where we were supposed to meet up with Anise and Ion if anything should happen. Though I imagine with Ion in the hands of the God Generals, she wouldn't have stayed here for very long. Anyways, I'm heading over there now; I'll meet you back at the inn later."

"You know, he acts pretty high and mighty for just a colonel," Guy noted once Jade was safely out of earshot.

"Just a colonel huh?" Asch interjected, "I wouldn't bet anything on that."
"He's right!" A nearby guard jumped into the conversation upon which he had been eavesdropping. "Colonel Curtiss could have easily attained the rank of Lieutenant General already, but he's never accepted a promotion."

The group eyed the guard suspiciously, causing him to apologetically back off. The four of them shuffled over so they wouldn't be overheard.

"Hey Asch, how did you know that?" Luke inquired.

"I didn't, but he's pretty well known in the military. He's also rumoured to be a personal friend to Malkuth's emperor."

"I suppose that would make him the logical choice for the peace negotiations then," Guy commented. They had filled him in on the details of their little escapade the previous night over supper. "Then I guess we'll be heading for Kaitzur next?"

"Yes," Tear added, speaking for the first time since yelling at Luke, "That would be the most logical route. However, Luke and I don't have passports."

"Neither do I, I took off without mine." Asch added. Guy just didn't ask. He decided he didn't want to know what Asch had done to get across the border the first time. But considering the state Asch had been in when he left the manor, it had probably involved a lot of yelling, violence and probably more than a couple death threats. Guy didn't want to know. Asch was very scary when it came to dealing with Luke's wellbeing, especially when said wellbeing was potentially in danger.

"Well," Guy finally spoke up after thinking it over, "Dorian General Grants went through Chesedonia and is searching from that direction. If he follows through there, he should end up in Kaitzur, though maybe a bit sooner then we'll get there. He has extra passports with him from Duke Fabre, so if we can catch up with him, it should solve our problem."

"Master Van came looking for me too?" Luke perked up. Wait, why would Master Van come looking for him rather than Ion like he was going to? Maybe he got word that Ion was okay. Regardless, it made Luke happy to know that Van cared enough to join in the search personally when he probably had many other things he could be doing.

"Hmm..." Asch's train of thought followed similar tracks as his brother's. However, he doubted that word would have reached Van as to Ion's safety, well, what had been his safety. Now he was in the hands of the God-Generals. There was something else that bothered him. The God-Generals were in fact led by none other than Dorian General Van Grants. However, it was possible that Grand Maestro Mohs had been giving them orders. He was well within his boundaries to do so. This was more of a mess than he wanted to sort out, but he still wouldn't have any peace of mind until it all made sense.

"Haven't made it back to the inn yet I see?" Jade said, seemingly appearing out of nowhere and causing Luke to practically jump out of his skin, something in which Jade apparently took great pleasure.

"No," Guy replied, managing to hide his startled reaction much better than Luke had, "We were just discussing our next course of action."

"And? What did you come up with?"

"We figured it be quickest and most efficient to head through Kaitzur." Tear answered him.

"Ah, I wouldn't count on that route if I were you."
"Why is that Colonel?" Tear asked curiously.

"It seems that several small conflicts broke out around Kaitzur. The border is temporarily closed until those conflicts can be resolved."

"Hmmm, so things are even worse than we thought." Asch stated.

"Yes," Jade agreed, "At this rate war could break out any day now."


"Yes. Rescuing Ion should be our first priority," Tear agreed, "Without Ion, peace talks won't even begin."

The awkward silence that ensued her statement confused her a bit. The lack of any comment from the three boys also piqued Jade's interest but he did a much better job of hiding it than Tear ever would.

"We have to save Ion!" Luke pleaded, breaking the silence, his eyes never leaving Asch as if the sole decision was up to him. There wasn't a decision to be made though, Tear shook her head. They needed Ion or there was no way they could get Kimlasca's king to listen to them. Tear highly doubted either of the Fabre boys held quite that much sway over their uncle.

"Yes I know that." Asch finally answered exasperated. "We need to get Ion back or there won't even be peace negotiations. That doesn't change the fact that we aren't any closer to finding out where he might be. By now they probably have the Tartarus functioning again, they could be anywhere in Malkuth for all we know."

"Oh but we do know where to go," Jade whispered tauntingly into Asch's ear. Rather than jumping like Luke did, Asch shooed him away like some kind of bug.

"What's that supposed to mean old man?" Asch demanded.

"Nothing. Except I might know a general direction in which we might be able to search." Jade offered baiting them with every word. He had forgotten how much fun this could be.

"Wait, you know where Ion is?" A bite. Luke was proving to be the most fun of the lot.

"Not exactly. It appears that Anise stopped by here as expected and after, shall I say, discussing a few things with the guards; it seems she headed towards Akzerieuth. If I know anything about our young friend, I would say it's a safe bet that that's the direction Ion was taken in."

"So I take it we're headed through Akzerieuth then?" Guy confirmed.

"It would be the most logical and efficient choice." Jade answered unable to resist the taunt.

Luke ran a few paces before turning around to see the group following him, "Then lets go-" Luke choked on the last word as he was yanked into the nearby bushes. "Hey what-

"Shhht." Asch hushed him, and Luke was immediately silent catching onto his brother's seriousness.

"What is it?" Luke finally whispered, his gaze following where the rest of the group's was and fell upon three individuals standing at the entrance.

"I want a report," the smallest of the three commanded. His spiked green hair added a couple inches to his height, but despite his small stature he easily commanded the group behind him.
"What's our mission status?"

"Currently Arietta still has Ion, according to reports, they've experienced a couple delays, but are still more or less on schedule. The Special Operations team and their commander are working on the Tartarus and almost have it running." The second man said, the familiarity of his voice drawing Luke's attention. It was Largo. He had survived.

"You mean temporary Special Operations commander. She's hardly fit for such a position." The third person added. "I still don't see why that woman and her band of buffoons were given the job of fixing the Tartarus. Such a delicate job should have been left to one as refined as myself, Dist the Rose."

"It's Dist the Reaper, get you own title right." The first one replied. "What happened to Legretta?"

"Shut up Sync!" Dist protested.

"I believe she returned to the Tartarus to assist with its repairs." Largo provided.

"Is she still trying to show her up?" Sync shook his head, "Fool. Anyways," Sync continued dismissing his previous thought, "I want you to post a watch here for the night."

"Just for the night?" Largo questioned. "That hardly seems efficient."

"We don't have a choice. We currently lack the resources to maintain any kind of extensive watch. Also, as it stands we can't afford to unnecessarily antagonize the Malkuth military. Things are unstable enough as it is, not to mention that we are currently in custody of one of their landships. A little caution would be well advised." Sync argued. "If they don't show up here by morning, you can assume they've moved onto Kaitzur, I'll go ahead and set up a watch in that area. There's no way they could have gotten that far, and with the bridge out, the only way to Chessedonia is to catch a ship from the Kaitzur naval port."

"Oh all right." Dist conceded, "But you are to notify my at once if you capture that beastly Jade, I am the only one who can defeat that monstrosity."

"Yeah whatever." Sync replied, acknowledging that he had heard the man. He'd never hear the end of it until he did. That man had unhealthy obsessions with everything that piqued his interest, the Necromancer being one of them. Sync had much more important concerns at the moment, namely finding the group that escaped the Tartarus; there would be grave consequences for more than just them if he didn't.

"So Largo survived." Jade noted once they had safely snuck away from the entrance and back into the city and under the cover of its populace.

"It'll take a hell of a lot more than that to kill a God-General moron." Asch tossed in.

"Well, one can always hope." Jade shrugged off the insult. "But, Largo or not, it looks like we're spending the night."

"Yeah, we won't be getting far if the God Generals are watching the city." Tear added.

"But just what did you do to the Tartarus? It's been well over a day and it's still not running." Asch inquired incredulously.

"It's only meant to be inoperable for thirty minutes or so, an hour at most." Jade shrugged. "Well with any luck, Dist will get involved with its repairs. Then we'll be able to pick it up where we left
"We should have just taken them on!" Luke shouted.

"Please tell me that was a joke." Asch rolled his eyes at the stupidity of his sibling's suggestion.

"No, come on, we can probably still catch them! Then maybe we can find out where Ion is or at least what they're planning to do with him."

"Don't be stupid, you'd get creamed." Asch couldn't believe he was even having this conversation.

"No, you'd get creamed." Luke taunted, "I on the other hand-"

"Don't even try." Asch cut him off. "They are way beyond you. One of them alone is enough to wipe the floor with all five of us."

Jade coughed. "I beg your pardon..."

"No you don't beg my pardon Mr Fon slot seal. They would cream all five of us. Easily." Asch retorted.

Jade let out another indignant cough, but let the issue go. Even he knew better then to take up a lost battle.

"He's right Luke." Tear scolded, "You should try to think things through like Asch does."

This time Luke felt Asch tense up behind him too. Why did everyone have to dangle the other in front of them like some kind of prize to be had, or goal to be achieved? Luke couldn't stand it, neither could his sibling, even if he was the one being glorified. Well, there was one sure fire way to put a stop to it, provided Asch was willing to help him out; and judging by just how tightly Asch's fists were clenched, that wasn't going to be a problem.

"Good morning, Asch." Tear stifled a yawn as she exited her room. Getting up at dawn so consistently was starting to wear on her, though she was still far from her limit. Her tiredness was simply a reminder to herself on how lax she had become with her training recently.

"Good morning," he replied from where he was leaning against the wall in the entrance of the inn, patiently waiting for everyone else to get up.

"Where's Luke?"

"Still getting out of bed," he answered trying to keep his annoyed tone to a minimum. This time it was a laugh not a yawn that Tear stifled.

"He certainly is lazy; he could stand to be more like you."

She got no reply however, as a still somewhat tussled Luke came out of his room still rubbing the sleep from his eyes. His hair was a mess and his jacket hung messily off his shoulder. Asch just shook his head amusedly, saying nothing of the sorry state his not-such-a-morning-person brother was in.

By the time that Guy and Jade joined the three in the main lobby, Luke had fixed himself up and was more than ready to get on the road. Once they were sure that the God-Generals had indeed moved on, they gathered what supplies they could from the shops that were open that early in the morning and set off. At best, the journey would take a few days, not too bad considering they were
on foot, but the road they would be travelling took them through the mountains and would be far from easy.

And it would be long, Jade thought as he looked at his companions who were now tied up in a friendly conversation with each other. Though they were too far away for him to hear exactly what they were saying, from the way Tear had one hand on her hip and the other pointing at Asch while speaking to Luke, he could easily guess the topic of this particular discussion. He could only hope that wouldn't be the sole topic of conversation on this trip. Travelling with youngsters was such a headache.

The impending journey was not the only thing on the Colonel's mind as they passed through St. Binah's gates that morning. Something else was bothering him... something that wasn't quite right, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"Asch?" Jade caught the older redhead's attention from where he was watching Luke try to evade their female companion and her seemingly endless tirade regarding his untoward behaviour.

"What do you want old man?"

"Do you remember that Oracle Knight you killed on the bridge back on the Tartarus? The one at the controls?"

"What are you taking about? I didn't kill any Oracle Knight; the man at the controls was one of your soldiers."

"Right, my mistake. My apologies." Asch simply rolled his eyes and continued on.

"What was that about Jade?" Guy asked.

"Nothing." Jade's eyes followed the boys as they started onward towards Akzerieuth.

"Nothing at all."

"How much further is it?" Luke whined as he kicked a rock up the path only to have it roll back down the path at him. "At this point, I'd be perfectly happy to never see another rock in my life."


It felt good to just complain about things that bugged him and just get it out of his system. It was also nice to be able to whine without getting in trouble. Well, almost. The expected glare came from Asch, and he stopped for the time being.

"Don't worry Master!" Mieu bounced along beside Luke flapping his ears as he jumped. "We're almost there! So just hang in there!"

Luke eyed the little blue-green thing bouncing beside him, and then looked down the slope they were climbing. He was in the lead, followed by Jade and Guy, then Tear with Asch taking up the rear. He caught himself wondering if Mieu would bounce down the hill as well as the rubber balls he used to play with as a kid, and realized he was very tempted to try and find out. He was sure someone behind him would catch the thing before it got too far…

In all fairness, the stupid little thing really hadn't done anything to deserve it. In fact, it tried so very hard to be useful. Unfortunately, it somehow managed to royally screw up pretty much anything it
got involved with, including last night's supper. The charcoal they had to choke down, for lack of anything else to eat, was a painful reminder of why they refused its assistance when offered, and never let it near another of their meals. It tried so hard, but was so annoying.

"Luke!" An outraged Tear yelled as Luke's fist nearly came crashing down on the young cheagle's head mid bounce. Everyone froze and Mieu only softly bumped his head against the motionless fist and stumbled as he landed on one of the many rocks that lined the steep path they were climbing. hardly the reaction Luke had been hoping for.

"Honestly Luke! What do you think you're doing? Grow up! You don't see Asch harassing the poor little.-" Luke didn't even let her finish before spinning around continuing up the path. He didn't even want to hear it. "Where are you going? Listen to me when I'm talking to you!" She was cut off again as Asch brusquely walked passed her. Jade too, continued to move on, opting to stay out of this one.

"He's so immature… and rude… and ignorant." Tear stated to no one in particular.

"And Asch isn't?" Guy surprised her with a response.

"No, he's not. He's polite and considerate." Tear raised her voice to be sure Luke could overhear her. He chose not to acknowledge that comment.

"Look, Tear," Guy started hesitantly; "I know you mean well, but lay off it a bit would you?"

"What do you mean Guy? Are you suggesting we just let him run wild like that?"

"Well, first I wouldn't exactly call that running wild, its just typical Luke behaviour. You get used to it after awhile."

"So are you saying that its okay?"

"Not at all, but that wasn't the part I was getting at. I agree that Luke needs someone to put him in his place every once in awhile, but stop comparing him to Asch. They both really hate it when people do that… so if you need to scold Luke go ahead; just stop constantly telling him to live up to Asch."

"But they're the same age and had the same upbringing, really there's no excuse for Luke to display that kind of behaviour when Asch is able to handle things responsibly."

"Look, Asch isn't perfect either, and they get enough of people constantly comparing them because they're twins. You're Van's little sister right? Didn't people ever compare you to him as an Oracle Knight? How did that make you feel?"

"That was pathetic, Tear. By your age, Van could have completed that course in half the time!"

"I'm- I'm sorry!" she managed through heavy breaths. "I'll do it better next time Major Cantabile, ma'am!"

"There is no next time on the battlefield! If you need to say 'I'll do better next time', you're as good as dead."

"I'm sorry."

"Never mind, we're done for today. I'd better see some improvement next time we run through this
course. You're still a long ways from comparing to Van. Catch ya later kiddo."

"I'm sorry..." Tear said to the now empty room.

*I'm sorry I'm not my brother...*

"Tear?"

"Never mind, it's nothing. You're right; maybe I'll apologize to them later."

"Sounds good to me, now let's get moving. I doubt they plan to slow down to wait for us."

Tear stifled a small laugh. "No, that would be considerate."

The small mining town of Akzerieuth was alive with activity. Though it was by far the smallest place they'd been to, it seemed the busiest of them all. Unlike all the other places, it wasn't alive with people; it was alive with fon machines.

Guy's eyes lit up at the sight, he had always had an undying passion for the Dawn Age technology and this small mountain town was a treasure trove for an enthusiast such as him. Running along tracks in and out of the hundreds of mines that dotted the mountain walls, lifting and lowering rocks and metals throughout the different levels, there were fon machines of every shape and size, every function and design, and certainly enough to keep Guy amused for a couple of lifetimes.

Clusters of houses sat on the far edge of the small crater that had slowly grown through the continued excavation of minerals. A small inn and a shop also sat near the houses providing supplies for the workers and rest for the families that came to visit.

"Don't give me any of that! I know he was through here so spill it before I spill your guts!" A very familiar voice came from the entrance of the nearest tunnel.

"I-I- swear I didn't see anyone. All I saw was a couple of ligers in the lower mines, but that was yesterday and no one has seen them since," the watchman stuttered. Apparently the young dark haired Fon Master Guardian had some unique skills when it came to retrieving information.

"You'd had better hope so," Anise replied sadistically before noticing the group standing behind her.

"Oh Luke! Asch! It's so good to see that you're both okay!" Anise ran up and clung to Asch who simply stared at the girl that was now hanging off of him. "I was worried something had happened to you guys when you didn't show in St. Binah."

"Oh come now Anise, you only waited in St. Binah for 20 minutes," Jade stated as he brushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose.

"Don't be silly Colonel; I waited as long as I could. Besides, how could you have known that?" She whistled sweetly.

"We may not have been there, but the guards you harassed divulged quite a bit of information regarding you and your brief stay in the city."

Anise glared at the Colonel before snuggling closer to Asch. "You know I wouldn't do anything like that, don't you Asch?" Asch looked down at her one eyebrow arched.
"I wouldn't put it past you." Luke said stifling a laugh.

"Oh yeah, well..." Anise stuck her tongue out at Luke.

"Ah so you've chosen your favourite brother," Jade teased.

"It was love at first sight." Anise giggled and held onto Asch even tighter.

"That's good, I was worried you were going to try and marry them both."

"Hey!" Anise objected before resuming in her sweet tone of voice, "Don't worry, my heart only belongs to you. My one and only!"


After a moment of effort, Asch managed to get Anise off of him and shooed her towards Guy. The resulting scene that played out had all four of them in stitches as Anise discovered the extent of Guy's strange 'phobia'.

A dull roar in the distance caught Jade's attention as everyone else was still laughing. Well, everyone but Guy who was still quivering from behind the safety of a rock. In retrospect, it had probably been too late to warn the boys that they were standing on the tracks of the mining carts that were consistently exiting the nearby tunnel, though even had it not been, he wondered if he would have said anything anyways.

The empty cart ploughed into Asch knocking him into it before coming to a halt several feet down the tracks. Luke reacted at the last second and got out of the way, though not in time to spare his sibling's dignity.

Of course. It was so obvious now that he knew what it was. Three days and several random interrogation sessions later, he could finally put his finger on what bothered him that morning in St. Binah and only laugh at the sheer cleverness of it all, and of course at himself for not cluing in sooner.

"I'm impressed, to think you had me going this long..." Jade muttered to himself.

"What is it Colonel?" Anise gave him a very confused look. Like, did anything that came out of his mouth ever make sense?

Rather than answer Anise, he looked straight at Luke. "Having fun are we, Asch?"

The innocent worried expression on Luke's face melted away into a devilish smirk. "I'm impressed," Asch said to Jade, "You're the first person to ever notice."

Jade took the compliment for what it was. He gained more than enough satisfaction from the shocked expressions on all the other's faces. Luke, who had climbed out of the cart was brushing off the dirt from Asch's jacket and had made it back rejoin to the group.

"So you're telling me that Luke is really Asch and Asch is really Luke?" Tear was the first to manage to form words.

"Precisely. A clever little trick you two concocted there." Jade replied. The twins answered with a grin. It never got old, it really never did.
"But how— Since when?" Tear cried outraged.

"Since the night in St. Binah," The real Luke provided.

"But…but Luke was complaining the whole way here."

"So?" Asch replied "You think I never have anything I want to complain about?"

"And…and Asch was up early and ready before anyone else every morning," Tear continued confusedly.

"What? You think I can't get up and ready when I want to?" Luke answered both he and Asch still wearing matching amused grins. Tear's face was now only a couple shades shy of Luke's hair, and the way it was going, it would match Asch's quite nicely in about 20 seconds or so.

"You know, just 'cause Asch is more responsible and less fun than I am doesn't mean I can't be responsible and he can't be fun when we want to be." Asch kicked Luke in the shin.


The boys confirmed it with a smirk and a nod.

"What was that you were saying about love at first sight?" Jade taunted in her ear.

"Shut up Colonel!" Anise said her face a nice twin to Tear's.

"You—you two idiots!" Guy yelled causing them both to simultaneously cringe. "You know what the Duke and his Majesty would say if they caught you doing this again!"

"So?" The real Luke nonchalantly put his arms behind his head, "They didn't."

"And technically neither did you," Asch threw in.

"That's doesn't matter! You two know better than to be pulling this again." Guy sighed, defeated. "Look, just go borrow a room at the inn and switch back before I consider telling the Duke." The boys shrugged off the threat but still did as they were told. It wasn't any fun once everyone knew they were switched anyways.

"So I take it they've pulled this stunt before?" Jade inquired more than amused at how the situation had played out.

"Yeah," Guy reluctantly admitted. "It was their favourite game as kids. And of course, they look so alike that no one could ever tell they'd switched places."

"So, in the end how would you tell they had switched?" Tear inquired, looking for almost anything to keep her from ending up in a situation that embarrassing ever again.

"No one ever could. We only ever found out when one of them slipped up. Its been a few years since they pulled it, but I have a sneaking suspicion that it's more a case of them getting good enough not to get caught rather than them actually stopping."

"That's kind of sad," Anise added surprising the others with her comment.

"Sad? How so?" Guy inquired, surprised at the Fon Master Guardian's take on the situation.
"Well, I mean no one could ever tell them apart? I don't know...it just seems kind of sad to me. You'd think if someone knew them well enough, they could still tell, you know?"

"Yeah," Guy agreed, "and it's funny, it's the one thing we could never get them to stop doing either. No matter how much they were yelled at or punished, they never stopped, they just got better."

"So Anise, any luck on Ion?" Luke asked as he approached the group, ending their conversation.

"Sorry Luke, wait...you are Luke right?"

"Yes he is." Asch answered for him as he too joined in the discussion.

"Wait, how do we know for sure you're not lying?"

"Like this." Guy punched Luke sending him crashing to the ground.

"Hey! What the hell was that for?" Luke sat on the ground rubbing his cheek where Guy's hit had landed.

"Yep, that's Luke." Guy confirmed. "Oh, and you can consider that your punishment for switching places when you know you aren't supposed to." Guy added as he helped Luke off the ground.

"Wow, so how did you know by hitting him?" Anise inquired.

"Because Asch would have caught or dodged it." Guy said simply. "And even if it had landed-"

"I would have beaten the crap out of you." Asch finished Guy's sentence for him.

"What he said." Guy added nervously.

"So now what?" Anise interrupted anxious to get away from the topic of the twins, "We have no idea where Ion is or where they're planning to take him."

But she got no answer; everyone was staring in the direction of one of the mining tunnels. The stark contrast between the twin's expressions was weird. They were so alike just five seconds ago, and now they looked completely different.

"There's no way....." Asch mumbled, his expression dark and suspicious.

"What on earth..." Tear also muttered with a similarly dangerous look.

Luke's face however lit up as he called out.

"Master Van!"
"Master Van!"

Van looked up as he came out of the tunnel and spotted his apprentices across the way. It seemed that Asch had located his wayward other and Guy had been equally successful in locating the two boys, but what interested him most was the unique company that they kept. One of which was going to be trouble as she already had a knife drawn.

"Stand down Tear," he said defensively.

"Give her a good reason to," his eldest student called out.

"Talking should come before aggression, you of all people should know that," Van replied.

"Yeah well, you've got a lot of talking to do. From what I hear, you should be in Kaitzur looking for Luke," Asch threw back.

"Settle down Asch. I'd heard that they closed the border at Kaitzur, so I came through this way to continue searching for Luke, aAnd from the looks of things I'm glad that I did. Now, care to explain why you're so worked up?"

"Only as soon as you explain why your subordinates kidnapped the Ion that you thought had gone missing."

Van looked genuinely shocked at Asch's last statement. Luke couldn't say he was surprised, of course Master Van was shocked! He would never have anything to do with kidnapping Ion. In fact, he probably could have protected Ion if he hadn't been so busy looking for him. So why was Asch so upset all of a sudden? Didn't he trust Master Van?

Van lowered his voice. "This isn't the place to be speaking of such things. Come this way, we can borrow a room at the inn and speak there."

The short walk to the inn did a good job of redefining the term 'awkward silence'. Tear had put her knife away but was still sending daggers through the back of her brother's head with her eyes. Asch, Jade and Anise were all tense, though not as entirely mistrusting as Tear seemed to be, they were uncomfortable around him at best. Only Luke and Guy were somewhat relaxed, well as relaxed as one could be with the other four ready to pounce on the Commandant if he so much as hiccupped. But several hours later, and by hours Luke meant the tense few minutes their walk to the inn had taken them, they had all finally settled around a table in a makeshift conference room.

"Now," Van started the discussion, "what is this about Ion being kidnapped?"

"Don't play stupid! Why are you interfering with the Fon Master's attempts to avert war?" Tear blurted out.

"The God-Generals attacked us and took Ion away," Luke provided before anyone could further aggravate the situation by throwing in their two cents worth. "Tear has a point though. I thought you'd said the God-Generals were under your command, Master? You're their Commandant right? You don't really want a war to start, do you?"

"Slow down Luke," Van interrupted the tirade of questions that his overly concerned student was putting forth. "To start with, I don't even know how you met up with the Fon Master in the first
"Well..." Luke hesitantly trailed off, reluctant to admit to the trouble he'd gotten himself into.

"I believe I can explain," Jade offered.

"And you are?"

"Colonel Jade Curtiss, Third Division Malkuth Imperial forces."

"Ah, the Necromancer. I must say this is an honour. To what to we owe your esteemed presence?"

"Emperor Peony has requested that we present a proposal for peace to Kimlasca's king. At Fon Master Ion's request, we picked him up from the Chapel in Daath and proceeded to escort him to Baticul. We picked up these three during a brief stay in Engeve, and they have been so kind as to agree to assist us in this endeavour."

"Then the Tartarus was attacked by your God-Generals and Ion was taken away," Asch finished.

"Then the situation is indeed graver than I thought. While it's true that I command the God-Generals, they are part of the Grand Maestro faction. It's likely they're under orders from Mohs."

"So you're saying you have absolutely nothing to do with this?" Tear demanded, still angry.

"No. I was unaware of what my own troops were doing, so therefore I must bear some responsibility. I will go search for Ion. If it is indeed the God-Generals that have him, I have an idea as to where they might be holding him. I'll see to it that he is returned safely to Daath. In the meantime, you proceed to Baticul and ensure that negotiations proceed as planned."

"Now just wait a sec Commandant!" Anise spoke up, "We need Ion to help out with negotiations! Returning to Daath just means we would have to start all over again!"

"She has a point," Jade added, "It is unlikely that King Ingobert will see us without Ion as a neutral ambassador present."

"Yeah! And I'm not going anywhere without Ion!" Anise added.

"Ah, I see now." Van glanced over at Asch who had suddenly fallen silent. So that's how it was. He always was foolishly prudent. Not that he could blame the boy with a past like his.

"Then how about I meet you at Kaitzur Naval Port?" he offered as he handed Luke a set of tickets. "These are tickets I picked up for the ferry that leaves from there. There should be enough to get all of you back to Baticul."

"Wow! Thanks Master Van!" Luke held the tickets gratefully. He hadn't even thought of taking the ferry. Now they wouldn't have to walk so far; and he had never been on a boat! He'd always wanted the chance to ride one of the big ships that came and left from the port in Baticul.

"Where do you think you're going Van?" Tear protested as Van began towards the door.

"It is important that I depart as soon as possible if I'm to catch up with Arietta. We'll have to wait until later to discuss the problems between us. I will try to meet up with you within a few days. If I don't, I will send word to the port." Van closed the door behind him and was gone before anyone else could protest.

"Interesting," Jade muttered to himself.

"Nothing at all, Luke, don't concern yourself over it."

"Alright," Luke shrugged. He had already discovered that prying information out of Jade was a hopeless venture.

"I don't trust him." Tear stated, still glaring at the door though which her brother had left.

"Me neither." Asch agreed.

"You don't trust Master Van?" Luke asked incredulously.

"No." Asch trailed off, still deep in thought about everything Van had just said, and even more so about everything he hadn't said.

"Why not?"

"It's nothing you have to worry about!" Asch let out with a frustrated sigh. So much for his train of thought. "Though while we're on the topic of trusting and not trusting people," Asch continued, "You're part of the intelligence division aren't you Tear?"

"That's correct." Tear replied, unsure where Asch was going with this.

"Well the intelligence division is directly under Mohs command, so why don't you explain why you're so eagerly tagging along on this journey?"

"Come on Asch, stop it. If she was going to try anything, she would have done it a long time ago. She's proven she can be trusted!" Asch ignored Luke, his argument was empty anyway. He kept his gaze fixed on Tear, indicating he still wanted an answer.

"Thanks Luke, but its okay. I'm searching for something under orders from Mohs. I'm not at liberty to say more than that, but I guarantee that I have no intention of trying to harm any of you, or get in the way of your journey. I don't want a war, any more than Grand Maestro Mohs does."

"Well that's not saying much if Mohs is the one looking for war." Asch stated discontentedly, but decided against pushing the issue any further.

"So, now what?" Guy hesitantly broke the silence.

"Well, I don't see many options." Jade replied. "Commandant Grants so very kindly did not inform us of where he intended to go, so Kaitzur Naval port is all we have to go on for the time being."

"You're right, he didn't say where he was going." Guy realized. "So we're off to Kaitzur port then?"

"Not until tomorrow," Asch cut in.

"Why not? We've still got quite a bit of daylight ahead of us." Tear noted.

"No, Asch is right," Jade agreed. "Remember, the God-Generals set up a watch in the area around Kaitzur. At this rate it will be dark before we get out of the mountains. If possible, I'd like to try and make it to the port in a day."

"What? It took us three days to get here!"

"Chill out Luke," Guy said with a chuckle, "The mountain pass on the Kimlascan side may not
have been used in awhile, but it's much shorter. But still, all in one day...we'll be getting up early again won't we?"

"That's correct, so I suggest that you make use of the rest of today to rest up a bit." Jade grinned in a way that sent chills down everyone's spine.

"So we have the rest of the day to ourselves huh?" Anise noted. "Man, why couldn't we get a day off while we were at a resort or at least someplace with a beach nearby?"

"Well then you'll just have to make do. Maybe you can find the hot springs Akzerieuth is famous for," Jade suggested.

"Hot springs? Really? I love hot springs! I'm so on it! You wanna come Asch?"

"No thanks," he replied without even looking at the young Fon Master Guardian.

"I'll come! I'll come!" Mieu bounced over and hopped up onto Anise's Tokunaga doll.

"Okay then! Your loss," Anise sang as she practically skipped out the door with Mieu in tow.

"That was pretty cruel of you Jade, those hot springs dried up years ago," Guy noted once Anise was gone.

"She's going to kill you when she finds out you know," Asch said with an amused grin.

"Oh I'm sure I'll manage." Jade shrugged. "In the meantime, I'm going to go for a walk. We'll be up before sunrise so be sure not to stay out too late." He instructed as everyone started to file out of the room. "Oh, and boys?" The two redheads in question turned around. "No switching this time please."

Both of them snickered. "Yeah, yeah, whatever."

Tear sat on a rock and watched the sunset. It was beautiful from the mountain town, despite the fact that it came a bit earlier than she'd like it too. The sky was ablaze in shades of red and gold and bathed the small town in an orange glow. The workers had all finished for the day and children could be seen running and playing, oblivious to the troubles of the world, as they should be.

The solitude was nice after spending so much time with such a lively group of people. No one had seen Anise since she had set off searching for the non-existent hot springs. Guy had been practically bouncing from fon machine to fon machine, but she hadn't seen him in awhile either. As for Asch and Luke, they had both disappeared somewhere right after everyone had disbanded with no one the wiser as to what they had planned for the remainder of the day.

Those two.... She was still embarrassed over what had happened earlier. It served her right though, but all that time telling Asch to be more like himself! She halted that train of thought right there, before she drove herself crazy trying to figure out exactly what she had told Luke that she wouldn't have wanted to during the time he was playing Asch. Oh dear, that certainly could prove to be a dangerous trick they had going. She made a mental note to watch what she said to Asch as well.

As if her thoughts had summoned them, Tear spotted Luke and Asch on one of the lower levels, their hair gleaming in the golden sunset. Luke was laughing and running as he played tag with a bunch of the local kids, while Asch leaned against a nearby fence and watched, a soft smile on his face.
"Be careful not to get lost in thought," a voice whispered into her ear. Her heart just about jumped into her throat, as the Colonel moved around the rock and stood beside her. "Ah there are our boys," he said noticing Luke and Asch.

"Hello Colonel," Tear finally managed once she had regained some of her composure. Really, did he have to do that every time? The two remained in silence for awhile watching the twins. After awhile Luke and the kids had coerced Asch into joining them. Tear smiled. "Do you suppose they've been at that all day?"

"Maybe, maybe not." Jade replied, "They certainly both have a soft side when they think no one is watching."

"So what did you do today Colonel?"

"I thought I'd see the sights. The Akzerieuth mines really are fascinating."

"Why were you in the mines? Was there something going on?" Tear asked worriedly.

"Now what would make you think that?"

"I highly doubt the sights were that interesting."

"My dear, I have a certain blonde enthusiast already in bed who would beg to differ."

Tear stifled a laugh. So that's where Guy had gone off to. Not a bad idea. They would need to be well rested.

"Actually Tear, there's something I've been wanting to talk to you about."

It was about time. She had been expecting the question to come up for quite awhile now, and was frankly quite surprised that the Colonel had held off so long. "My fonic hymns right?"

“That's right."

"I think your fonic hymns are really pretty," a familiar voice came from the path behind them. "Something about them is just so- so peaceful."

"Oh hello Luke. Asch." Jade acknowledged the two boys who came to join them, still somewhat out of breath, with Asch, as expected, doing a much better job of hiding it. Both looked pretty worn out. "Enjoying a bit of a break?"

"Yeah!" Luke answered with a big smile. "I like this place. It's a really nice town once all the machines are shut down."

"Just don't let Guy hear you say that," Asch said with a bit of a chuckle.

"You don't need to worry, he's in bed," Tear replied.

"Anyways," Jade dragged them back on topic, now that he'd finally raised the issue, he wanted his answers. "I've been wondering about your fonic hymns. They're different from the ones I know."

"Yes, I imagine they would be. The hymns I use are Yulia's fonic hymns," Tear replied.

"Really?" The topic piqued Asch's interest. He'd read about Yulia's fonic hymns once and their ability to go toe to toe with regular fonic artes. Supposedly they were handed down in secret from generation to generation. There was proving to be more to Tear than met the eye. "I thought those
were useless with the words and melodies."

"To use Yulia's hymns, not only do you need to know the words and melody, but you need to understand the symbolism and true meaning behind those words." Tear answered, slightly uncomfortable at suddenly being the center of attention, not that she'd ever show it.

"Wow, that's pretty impressive." Luke commented. "So you know all the songs and all the melodies and all the meanings? How do you remember it all?"

"Actually I don't know them all. I only understand the meaning behind the first two."

"Hmmm, what I'd like to know is where you learnt them. I thought that the hymns themselves had been lost." Jade questioned.

"They've been passed down through my family for generations. I've been told that it's because my family is descended from Yulia. I don't know if there's any truth behind that or not."

"Wow really? That's cool!" Luke exclaimed. "Wait, I suppose that makes Master Van a descendant from Yulia too. I never knew that. Actually come to think of it, I didn't even know Master Van had a sister. He doesn't really talk about himself a lot, does he?"

"No, that wouldn't be like him," Tear sighed.

"So I suppose you don't know the Grand Fonic Hymn then?" Asch inquired.

"No, the Grand Fonic hymn is the proof of the covenant between Yulia and Lorelei. It's a combination of all the fonic hymns."

"Yeah, that's what I'd heard," Asch replied leaving Luke to wonder where Asch learnt all this stuff. It hadn't been until their adventure had begun that he realized just how much more knowledgeable Asch was.

"Well, I think I'm going to head to bed." Tear stood up.

"So early?" Jade taunted.

"Yes, because judging by how long it's been, I don't want to be here when Anise finds you." Tear shot back.

"I'll come too!" Luke jumped up. "Are you coming, Asch?"

"I dunno, I think I'd like to watch the little twirp take on the old man," Asch said with a grin.

"Aren't we in an awfully good mood," Jade noted. Asch just shrugged it off, still with a smile on his face. As amusing as it would be to watch Anise outright slaughter Jade, it would be an early morning, and it wasn't going to be the kind of day he could get away with being half alert. The God-Generals were waiting, and if they could sneak through unnoticed, he'd be very surprised.

"Luke, are you sure? I'm almost positive we've been this way before." Guy commented as he lifted a branch out of the way and allowed Tear and Anise to pass before sneaking under it and letting it snap back, almost hitting Jade in the face. Oh he'd pay for that one later.

Luke just mumbled for the millionth time that yes, he was sure, and no, they had not been this way already, it was just the fact that every tree in this Score-forsaken forest looked identical.
It had been a long day for all of them. True to his word, Jade had them all up and gone before sunrise. Not before the delayed sunrise in the mountains, before the normal sunrise, so they were all on edge. Even Mieu wasn't in his usual bouncy mood, and opted to ride on Luke's shoulder in spite of the many branches he had taken head on. Even he was half asleep. Granted he had gone hot-spring hunting with Anise so there was no saying how late he'd been up. In the end, whatever occurred between Anise and Jade after the rest of them had gone to bed, they would never know, but Anise had been in a chipper enough mood to tell them they probably didn't want to.

Trudging through the mountain path in the dark had been tediously difficult at best and the dodging of Oracle Knights they had to do once they'd gotten out of the mountains wasn't much better. Which was why Luke had suggested they cut through the woods to get off the main road. Bad idea.

Luke pulled back the last branch that blocked the way out of the forest to a very familiar sight. Deo Pass. Or more specifically, the entrance to Deo Pass, which they had now seen three times today. It wasn't the same as the last three times, this time the sun was slowly creeping down turning the sky a soft golden, which would eventually proceed to a bright orange, then a dull purple, and the night would set in, and they would be vulnerable.

Asch let out a frustrated sigh. Just great. He should have known better than to let Luke lead. Luke couldn't tell east from west at sunrise much less navigate a forest.

"Well, this is lovel," Jade commented. "As much as I enjoy the view of Deo pass at sunset, I can think of a few other sights I'd rather be seeing."

"So now what, do we look for somewhere safe to make camp?" Guy asked, trying his best not to get angry with Luke, he had only been trying to help.

"No, we'd be sitting ducks with all the Oracle Knights in the area. There are more than I thought there'd be," Tear pointed out.

Asch let out another large sigh. He had really hoped it wouldn't come to this. "This way." Asch turned around and walked back the way they came.

"I do hope your sense of direction is better than your other half," Jade stated, exasperation beginning to sound in his voice. Even he wore thin after awhile. "Either way I would like to know where you intend to go. There's nowhere close enough for us to reach by nightfall."

"Well you have two options. Stay here and sleep with the God-Generals, or follow me. Take your pick," Asch snapped back. He really didn't want to argue. That he was forced to resort to this was bad enough without Jade's sarcasm added to the mix.

Asch made his way through the woods, the group silently in tow. Every now and then he'd stop and check a nearby tree, each one he checked bearing a mark, an old score in the bark that had never fully healed. It took about an hour, but by the time they made it out of the forest, they were no longer anywhere near the mountains.

Rather, the cool breeze that cut through the air was refreshing and spoke of the sea. The sun was now setting and the sky was a bright orange, and against the burning horizon, they spotted the outline of what looked like a castle.

"Choral Castle, good thinking Asch," Guy commented when he saw the building on the horizon. "I forgot that it was in this area."

"Don't be silly Luke, don't you remember? It's the Fabre family's vacation home." Guy answered.

"Wow!" Anise looked up at in awe once they had gotten closer. "This is just your vacation home?"

"Well to be accurate, it was our vacation home." Asch replied. "It was abandoned back when I was still pretty young."

"Yeah," Guy added, "When the front line of the last war got too close."

"Hm, is that so?" Luke looked up at the castle. "I really don't remember it much. Must not have been very memorable."

"It wasn't bad when it was still maintained, can't say much for it now." Asch glanced around the courtyard. Weeds had overtaken the gardens that had once been alight with flowers; the stone walls had crumbled and were falling apart. It really was a pity; it had been a nice place, but that was before everything happened. In all honesty, this was probably the last place in Auldrant that Asch wanted to be, with the single exception of being lost in those woods with the God-Generals on their tail.

Guy opened the castle doors with relative ease. The inside was as much of a mess as the outside had been. Asch's stomach involuntarily lurched as he looked around. Nothing had changed. This place trudged up a myriad of memories he'd much rather leave buried.

Asch stuck out his arm preventing his brother from running out into the entrance hall and silencing him on the spot. Something was amiss. Asch looked around. Things weren't right. The door should have been bolted shut, and none of the windows were boarded up anymore. There was no dust gathered on the floor either.

"Asch, what's the matter?" Guy whispered. Asch didn't turn around but replied in a hushed tone.

"We're not alone."
"What do you mean we're not alone?" Luke asked, keeping his voice down.

"Exactly what I said," Asch curtly replied. "Someone's been here."

"And recently too," Jade added also noticing the lack of dust and debris in the entrance and down the center of the corridors.

"The place was boarded up and shut down tight when we left it. Everything is open now, some one has been here," Asch provided.

"How do you know that it wasn't just the monsters? I mean, I see lots of them kicking around here," Anise pointed out, still keeping a wary eye out for said monsters in case they decided now would be a wonderfully ironic time to attack. No, apparently only Jade had such a bad sense of humour, even the monsters weren't quite so cynical.

"The monsters kicked down the door?" Guy asked. "I highly doubt it. No one should have been here since the White Knights locked it down tight 7 years ago. They did a pretty good job of it, it may have been awhile since then but I doubt this was just nature's doing."

"Besides, look over there," Asch pointed to a dusty area away from the beaten path, so to speak. A thin layer of dust still covered the floor in spite of the myriad tracks that had been left by the various wandering monsters. "Someone would have to be coming and going pretty frequently to have swept all the dirt and dust from the floors."

"You don't think…" Tear began.

"The God-Generals?" Jade finished. "I wouldn't dismiss the possibility. Run down as it is, the castle would still function rather nicely as a base, and is certainly the most practical and well suited facility in the area if one wanted to go unnoticed."

"So does that mean this is where they're keeping Ion?" Luke asked.

"That too is a possibility. I suggest we investigate a little further before we settle in for the night. If that's alright with you, Asch?"

"Do whatever the hell you want, old man."

"You just can't resist, can you?" Jade said with an especially sly grin.

"Why would I want to?" Asch shot back, though he was far from amused. His snarl dampened the amused grin on the Colonel's face. Asch instantly regretted it, he knew that look on Jade's face, and the Colonel was already in the process of trying to deduce why this place was making him uncomfortable.

The last thing Asch wanted was Jade thinking. As much as he'd like to discredit the man, he had to respect Jade's intellect. From the short time he'd spent with him, Asch had noted his talent for piecing together the most obscure pieces of information to come up with the truth, and this abandoned manor was filled with more truths than he wanted anyone knowing.

"Wow this place is huge!" Anise's voice echoed as they started down the stairs into the basement.
"Keep your voice down, someone will hear you!" Asch snapped.

"Jeez, sorry." Anise stuck her tongue out at Asch as soon as his back was turned. Man, what was his problem all of a sudden? It seemed the more they explored, the crankier he got. He'd been even more on edge since they decided to check out the basement. What was his deal anyways? Luke didn't seem so bothered about being here.

"Remember anything Luke?" Tear inquired as Luke poked and prodded the statues that lined the hall. He'd learn his lesson when a monster popped out of one. It wouldn't be the first time in this crazy mansion.

"Hmm, not especially, why do you ask?" Luke returned with a smile.

"Yeah well, it just seems strange that Asch remembers this place enough to find it, but you don't even remember being here," Tear replied.

"I've been somewhat curious about that myself," Jade interrupted.

Luke simply shrugged. "I'm sure I probably came here a few times, but I just don't really remember much about when I was really young, you know? Asch must have been here more than I was."

"I suppose that makes sense that only one of you would have come," Tear commented. She really couldn't fault Luke, she couldn't say she remembered much from when she was really young either.

"Oh? What makes you say that?" Luke inquired curiously.

"This place isn't all that far from enemy borders. Especially during a time of war, I highly doubt Duke Fabre would want to risk both his heirs should the worse case scenario come to pass." Jade provided.

"Well now that you're done analyzing our past, you want to get a move on? I'd like to get this over with and get some rest sometime tonight." Asch cut in.

"Yeah, from the sounds of things, you need it," Guy mumbled under his breath.

"What was that?" Asch demanded.

"I'm talking about how rude you're being," the blond snapped back. "You don't have to jump down someone's throat for having a conversation. Some of us don't mind being sociable."

"I'll show you a thing or two about-"

"Stop it!" Luke yelled in a tone that turned everyone's heads. Tear had never heard Luke raise his voice like that. Sure he'd been angry and yelled before, but it was always a whiney, annoyed kind of anger. This time he was very serious.

What in the Score had Asch so upset? Luke stared down his best friend and his older sibling, neither who dared issue a peep. Luke could tell Asch had been uncomfortable from the moment they'd started heading towards this place, but this went beyond just being uncomfortable or even irritated. Asch was only ever like this for one reason: to hide the fact he was afraid of something. What that something was, Luke had no idea, but it was as obvious to him as Asch's anger was to everyone else, and Luke wanted to get to the bottom of it. Asch was his brother after all, moody though he may be, if there was a chance he could help, he wanted to be there.

"Now if the God-Generals aren't on our tail after that, we'll know for sure they're not here." Anise
said breaking the awkward silence.

"Indeed," Jade agreed, pushing his glasses up his nose. "Shall we continue? And in a more obscure manner this time?" He suggested, his gaze fixed on Asch. Something was going on with him. He could understand it if the boy was on edge, but this went beyond concern over the God-Generals, and Jade would find out what it was before these irrational breakouts cost them all their lives.

Despite being underground, the basement wasn't spared the ruin that had befallen the rest of the mansion. Moss grew on many of the statues and walls giving the entire place an eerie feel. The fading light of day still seeped in through cracks where the upper walls had been worn away by the elements, but not nearly enough to dismiss the need for the makeshift torches they were using.

The group had proceeded in silence since their last major outburst, listening for the tell-tale sign of a God-General or even just the monsters they had attracted. The silence didn't really change much, Asch was still on edge, Guy was still in a bad mood, Luke was still curious about everything, and Anise, well Anise was her usual chipper self. For all their sakes, Jade hoped that the light at the end of the hallway opened onto the ocean so they could end their search and get some rest. Hope was always a rather fruitless notion. It hadn't served him in the past, why would it be any different now?

There weren't a lot of things that could make Jade Curtiss stop short, but what they came across at the end of the hall was one of them.

Special fonstones had been placed around the room to keep it lit. Unlike its surroundings, it was in surprisingly good condition, and had obviously been maintained. Though such trivial details weren't needed to tell that someone had been in this room since the castle was abandoned, the large fon machine in the center of the room would have done just as well.

"Wow! Look Master!" Mieu bounced over onto the top level of the fon machine with Anise and Luke not far behind him. It was huge! Bigger than any fon machine Luke had ever seen. It was two stories tall with two identical platforms on each story. There was a set of stairs on the other side of the room that led down to the lower platform and to even more fon machines.

Luke looked back at Guy, expecting him to be ecstatic about this new discovery, but to Luke's surprise, he wasn't. In fact, he was very serious and had a very dark look on his face. He couldn't still be mad about being yelled at before, could he?

Why? Asch stood glued to the spot. Why of all the places did they have to come here? This place so seeped in nightmares that he could still hear the screams of pain as they echoed off the walls. Pain his own body seemed to echo, even now. Stupid! It all happened a long time ago. So then why? What was he so afraid of?

Jade, Tear and Guy also moved to join the three already on the fon machine. Asch didn't know how he could move, it was already taking every drop of willpower he had to keep from giving into the emotions that his memories invoked. Somehow he put one foot in front of the other and followed suit, because if he didn't, there would be questions. Questions he already knew he couldn't answer, and he'd be damned if that was how everything was going to come out.

"Hmmm," Jade stared up at the machine. As to what it was, he had no doubt. As to how it got here, now that was an interesting question. One he would have loved to ask, but if his growing suspicions were indeed correct, and he was almost positive that they were, if only by the reaction of the eldest 'twin', then that would be a rather cruel thing to do. Even for him.
"What is it Colonel?" Anise looked up at him curiously. "Do you know what this thing is?"

"I have an idea of what it might be, but I'd rather not divulge until I am certain. How about either of you?" He passed the question over towards Guy and Asch.

"I have my suspicions, but I'm not any more certain than you are." Guy replied, his gaze never leaving the machine. Asch only nodded in agreement, he too staring at the machine as if he was in a dream he was hoping to wake up from soon. Or from emotions swirling below his frozen exterior, a nightmare.

"Really?" Luke asked. "What do you think it is?"

"No, it's nothing." Guy dismissed the subject. "I'm not sure what it is, but either way, it's nothing you have to worry about Luke."

"I just want to know what it is." Luke muttered, the excitement he had gained from this newest discovery vanishing in an instant. "Asch? Do you know what it is?"

"No." Asch answered softly his gaze still never leaving the machine.

"You do so know what it is!" Luke argued. Why did everyone treat him like he was stupid? "Come one why won't you tell me?" Luke was getting angrier, "Is it because you think I'm too stupid? That I won't understand even if you do tell me? You never tell me anything! No one ever stops to explain things, and then you all yell at me for never knowing anything! Well, then? Why won't you tell me so I can know?"

This drew Asch's attention, but the gaze he had fixed on Luke was cold. Luke had never seen him like that before. Oh he'd been angry with Luke, and anger, Luke could handle. This- this was something completely different.

"That's enough I think." Jade stepped between the two redheads. "I suggest we retire for the night. The God-Generals obviously aren't around, or they'd have shown up a long time ago, and it looks like more than one of us could use some rest."

"I agree," Tear said as she began back the way they had come, "It's been a long day for all of us, how about we set aside everything until we've had a good night's sleep?"

"I think that's a wonderful idea," Guy replied, quickly following suit. "Come on you two, let's get some rest. Whatever your problem is, you can settle it in the morning."

Luke took one last look back at the machine before muttering to himself, "I don't think so."

"What do you think you're doing?" Asch watched Luke jump at the sound of his voice as it echoed in the otherwise empty chamber. Luke looked up at him from the lower platform, realizing he'd been caught. Everyone had settled in and been asleep for a couple hours when Asch noticed Luke get up and sneak out. His brother was so very predictable.

"Since no one is going to tell me, I'm going to figure this thing out for myself!" Luke declared as he continued to poke around the fon machine's lower level. Asch let out a huge sigh before joining Luke on the lower level.

"I don't know what you're hoping to accomplish, but whatever it is, it isn't going to happen, so just get yourself back to bed."

"I wasn't asking," Asch replied curtly, grabbing Luke by the arm. He was ready to use force if need be, whatever it took to get them both out of this Score-forsaken place.

"What the hell is your problem?" Luke yelled yanking his arm out of Asch's grasp. "You've been scared out of your wits since we got here! And don't look at me like that," Luke continued as Asch glared at him. "You might be able to fool everyone else into thinking you're just being an asshole, but I know damn well that you're just scared of something. But that doesn't mean you can just take it out on everyone around you! You don't want to be down here, fine! Just go! I'm not leaving until I figure out what this thing is!"

That- that idiot- how dare he! "You want to know what the hell this thing is?" Asch yelled, no longer able to hold back. How dare he presume to know everything! "This thing is what they use to make replicas!"

The two brothers stood in silence for a long time. Neither moved, neither dared breathe. Asch regretted the words the second they'd escaped his lips. Guilt curdled in his stomach leaving a sour taste to flood his mouth. He had just been so mad, and so damn anxious to get out of here, that he hadn't been thinking. It really wasn't fair to Luke.

Luke slowly walked over to the machine, and gently placed a hand on it, turning back to look at Asch.

"So…this is where I was born?"

Asch answered with a soft nod.

"Luke, I'm-

"No, it's okay" Luke gently shook his head. "I'm the one who's sorry. I was being selfish... I knew you were upset about something, and I didn't stop to think."

"No, you couldn't have known." Asch shook his head. "And you were right earlier; we haven't really been explaining much to you. Everything has been happening so fast, I don't think to slow down every once in awhile." He replied as he too came over to the platform. Instead of stopping on it like Luke had, he hopped down in the space behind it. Curious, Luke followed him.

Luke's heart creeped up into his throat when he saw what it was Asch was investigating. Cut out from the rock wall behind the fon machine was a small cell. Metal bars were raggedly jammed into the stone and the miniature crypt was hardly big enough to hold a child. Water dripped from the ceiling and covered the jagged floor, so there wouldn't be anywhere dry or even safe for the captive to rest. No wonder Asch hated this place. Now Luke understood why Asch had been so upset, he began to fathom what sort of memories still clung to him. And without even thinking he….

"I-Is that..." Luke could barely form the words.

"That's where I was kept," Asch said quietly.

"I'm sorry-

"Don't be," Asch said with a bit of a chuckle, "It's hardly your fault. I remember waking up in that cell. It was summer, so I wasn't dressed very warmly. I froze in there." He looked up at Luke with a sad smile. Somehow Luke had a feeling that the cold had been the least of his worries. "All I wanted was to go home," Asch continued. "But they kept me in there doing experiment after
experiment. It hurt. I didn't understand any of it. I just...I just wanted to go home."

They both solemnly returned to the main chamber. After a moment, Asch took a deep breath. "So, you've been down here a good fifteen minutes, what did you get figured out?"

"Well," Luke began trying to shake off the intensity of the moment they had just shared. "Those little fon machines over there control this big one."

"Yeah, and?"

"And? That's all I figured out." Asch couldn't help but laugh outright. It was a good thing he decided to come down after all; Luke would have been here for the rest of the year at the rate he was solving the mysteries of this room.

"Hey..." the indignant Luke protested. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Asch managed between chuckles.

"Oh. I did find this though." Luke held up a fon disk. "It was in one of those fon machines."

"Let's see." Luke handed Asch the fon disk. "Hmm," Asch looked at it for a moment before looking back at Luke with a devilish grin. "Want to see what's on it?"

"Sure!" Luke followed Asch over to one of the many fon machines where Asch stuck the disk in. All kinds of information appeared on the screen. Asch skimmed through it, while Luke just watched in awe. One more talent he could throw on the list of things he didn't know Asch could do. "So what does it say?"

"It's a log." Asch replied still skimming.

"A log?"

"Yeah, like a journal of sorts. It's the records that they kept while they were conducting experiments."

"What kind of experiments?" Luke got a pointed look from Asch. "Wait...me?"

"Yeah," Asch returned to reading the logs. "It's the records of what they did here 7 years ago. I'm amazed the White Knights never confiscated this. Though come to think of it, they should have destroyed the entire facility."

"Maybe they didn't make it down this far?"

"They should have searched the entire place," Asch pondered. "I wonder if access to it was sealed somehow."

"But if it's open now doesn't that mean..."

"Someone is using it again," Asch concluded.

"Well anything on the disc that can tell us?" Luke asked.

"Nothing more recent than 7 years ago. It's odd though, the project is still labelled as incomplete."

"No kidding... I mean, I'm here aren't I?"
"Just let me finish reading this first... Based on what it says, they never got the chance to complete the last procedure because the military had found them and they had to take off."

"Well what didn't they finish?"

"Hmm, something about synching our fon slots since we're perfect isofons." Luke was silent. "You can ask." Asch said simply after a moment's silence.

"Sorry," Luke said with a small chuckle, "but what is a perfect isofon?"

"It's okay, that's not something anyone would know. I did a lot of reading on all this stuff back when I finally returned home. Basically, everything has its own unique fonon frequency. Even replicas have one that's different from their original. In our case, you're a perfect replica, even our fonon frequency is identical. Even I'm not sure what it means to sync our fon slots though."

"Fon slots, that's what you, Jade and Tear use to gather fonons for fonic artes right?"

"Yeah that's right."

"I kinda wonder, do you think its maybe because our fon slots aren't synced or whatever that we get those headaches?"

"Hmm, that's an interesting idea. It's very possible. There's really only one way to find out though."

"Are you sure that's okay?" Luke said somewhat hesitantly. "I mean, are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"It's all here, and it's not overly complicated, the fon machines themselves do most of the work."

"Why don't we go ask Jade?"

"No." Asch almost cut Luke off. "I can do this. Besides, do you want to be the one to explain all this to him-"

"No!" Luke Shrunk back, not realizing how loud he had yelled. He hadn't thought of that particular implication.

Asch came over to Luke's side, took his hand and looked him straight in the eye. "Relax. Just trust me, okay?"

Luke smiled, "I trust you." Asch returned the smile and showed Luke where to go.

The machine emitted a soft light that bathed the room in an eerie green. Asch could only watch on and hope that his siblings unwavering trust had not been misplaced.

Everything was dark. What had happened to the light? What had happened to everything for that matter? Luke's heart started racing. He was alone in the emptiness, lost in the darkness. The panic began to set in. No. Luke forced himself to calm down. Asch said to relax. That everything would be okay, and he trusted him. Now stop and think.

It was dark. His eyes were closed. He had closed his eyes, or had they simply shut on their own? He couldn't remember... It didn't really matter. He just had to calm down, just had to relax. By the time he had settle down, he could see everything. Well, that wasn't entirely true, everything was still dark, but he could feel everything. Asch was still there, he had come closer.
Asch was worried; scared he'd done something wrong. That Luke would be hurt somehow. Now how did Luke know that? But he was fine. It was nice here, warm and safe, even with that small inkling of worry in the back of his mind. It was the same darkness as before, but it was no longer frightening.

He wasn't there alone anymore.

The light died down and the dull rumble of the fon machine faded. Luke sat up groggily as if he had just woken from slumber. He slowly stood up and made his way over to Asch who was also half asleep on his feet. They looked at each other for a moment and both started to laugh.

"I think it's about time we get some sleep," Asch finally managed. Neither of them knew why they were laughing. Maybe because they were both tired, or maybe because they had just attempted the most reckless thing either of them had ever attempted to pull; but whatever the reason, any remaining traces of resentment or anger melted away in that brief moment of shared mirth.

"I think that's a good idea," Luke agreed, rubbing his eyes and suppressing a yawn. He hadn't realized just how tired he was, on top of the fact that that whole fon slot thing still had him kind of out of it. Asch too from the looks of things. Wait... why was Asch affected too? He hadn't been on the machine... Luke barely had the brain power to consider it. With a yawn, Luke pushed the thought to the back of his mind. He'd ask Asch in the morning.

"Then let's go." Asch and Luke slowly made their way out of the basement and back up to the room where the group had decided to crash for the night. As they left Asch couldn't help but wonder how Luke did it. As the last traces of his anger had faded away, so had all his fear; and he knew that he could start to deal with all those terrible memories.

Because now he remembered exactly why it had all been worth it.

"I told you I heard something!" The high pitched voice echoed across the empty chamber.

"Shut up Dist, you'd had better be right to have me up at this hour," a second voice snapped back. "We have to be gone before first light tomorrow if we're going to catch them."

"You say that like it's my fault we haven't captured them yet. I wasn't aboard the Tartarus when they escaped, you know."

"Neither was I, but you'd do well to remember that this is our assignment. Now where is this 'noise' you heard?"

"Shut up Sync! I know when there are rats crawling around my lab." The two God-Generals came upon room with the large fon machine that Dist had designated as 'his lab'.

"There you see. Nothing! Now let's get some rest or else-"

"Not so fast." Dist cut him off, scurrying over towards the controls. "Now what do we have here?"

"What is it?" Sync inquired and Dist held up the fon disk. "So you found your fon disk, big deal, its been there for ages. That doesn't prove that anyone's been here."

"Oh but it does." Dist replied with nothing short of an evil grin dawning his face.

"And how do you know that?"
"Because, my intellectually challenged friend, it's been recording data."
Tear slowly opened her eyes to find the sun's rays beating down on her face. The unexpected warmth was comfortable and left the melodist at ease until the situation she was embroiled in returned to mind. Sitting herself up, Tear stole a glance out the window. The sun had not only risen, but was well up above the horizon; it was even later than she thought. They had never slept this late before, in fact by now they usually had put some distance behind them. Across the room Tear noted Jade putting his glasses back on; apparently he found the need for some good rest outweighed any urgency to get back on the road. Tear wholeheartedly agreed. Despite their brief reprieve in Akzeriuth, the breakneck pace and lack of sleep over the past several days had been wearing on them all and it had become painfully obvious during their previous night's endeavours.

Shaking the last of sleep's grasp from her, Tear scanned the room, finding the redheads seated against the wall across from her. The pair had fallen asleep sitting up, each supported by the other as they leaned inwards. Strange... was that how they had fallen asleep? She couldn't remember; not that it really mattered. They seemed so peaceful like that, and almost kind of...cute. At the exact same moment, both of them cracked their eyes open and simultaneously blinked groggily. It was fascinating to watch; their actions were completely in sync and it made the resemblance between the two of them all the more astounding. Luke stretched and yawned, waking Mieu who had curled up in Luke's lap.

Once the twins had woken, it didn't take long before everyone else was up. Mieu landed on Anise's head when he jumped down out of Luke's lap, and her resulting shriek woke Guy with a start. So much for her peaceful morning... Tear couldn't help but fell sorry for the young cheagle, who now had Anise's contempt to deal with for the rest of the day. Well, Tear decided she wouldn't let Anise be too hard him. Luke and Asch were bad enough.

Tear wished the calm of the morning could have lasted a bit longer. All traces of the serenity she had come upon when she had first woken were all but gone. Mieu bounced around trying to apologize while fleeing from an angry Anise, Guy was still scolding Anise for scaring him like that while Asch was in the process of mocking Guy for being such a pansy. Luke fought to keep the peace between Asch and Guy, but was only succeeding in adding to the chaos and Jade... Jade was watching the whole thing nothing short of amused.

It lasted for no more than a second, then Jade's amusement faded before Tear's very eyes and his face grew deadly serious. "Silence! All of you!" His last words were barely a hiss but they almost echoed across the now frozen room. Everyone's attention turned to Jade. What was wrong?

"What's your status, Arietta?" The voice could be heard from the other room.

Jade immediately exited the room, chasing the voices that trailed in, followed closely by Guy, Anise and Mieu. Tear was impressed, she hadn't heard a thing, and she had been the one closest to the door. Even with his fon slots sealed, Jade proved he was still a force to be reckoned with.

Tear wasted no time joining her companions on the upper balcony. Looking down over the main entrance, she had to admit Jade had made the decision regarding their lodging quite well. From this vantage point they could observe the main entrance without being seen, and it was close enough to the door that they'd be able to track who came and went.

So the God-Generals were here after all. Jade watched the three distinct figures in the entryway. This could pose a problem. There was no way that they could take on three God-Generals in their current state. If they could corner just one of them...they might have a chance. This turn of events
might actually end up being rather fortuitous. If Arietta was here, the likelihood of Ion also being somewhere in the vicinity was quite good indeed.

"Everything is on schedule. I'll head over to the next location with Ion once my friends are done resting," Arietta replied.

"Aren't you tired of relying on those stupid monsters of yours? I could construct you something far more eloquent and reliable to get you and Ion from place to place. It would be much more convenient than those stupid birds," Dist offered from where he was sitting comfortably in his floating chair. Yes, he was in a floating chair. Dist always was one for pointless oddities.

"Don't insult my friends!" Arietta immediately became defensive, her fury causing Dist to retreat a few meters.

"What's going on over here?" The two boys came to join the rest of them.

"Shht!" Anise hushed them both, not letting her eyes leave the squabbling God-Generals on the lower level. Luke and Asch quietly settled into a spot where they too could watch.

"Enough you two!" Sync finally broke up the heated argument between Dist and Arietta. Pity. Jade had very much hoped for the opportunity to watch the young girl beat the living hell out of Dist. Oh well, some other time perhaps. "Dist, you know you have work to do." Sync ordered.

"Fine," Dist grumbled as he backed off and made his way out the door, "but don't think that this is over! I'm putting this in my revenge journal!" Arietta stuck her tongue out at Dist once his back was turned. Let him try it. Her friends always needed the extra exercise anyways.

"Arietta."

"What is it Sync?" Arietta shot back sourly, still angry and pouting over her encounter with Dist.

"I assume you've been enjoying your time with Ion?" All her anger faded and Arietta's face instantly lit up.

"Yes I have!"

"Good," Sync replied curtly. "Then I trust you will both be on your way shortly?" Arietta nodded. "I have to get going. Be careful, there are people in this area that are looking for Ion."

"No one is going to take Ion away from me!" Arietta suddenly regained her ferocity.

"Make sure they don't," Sync said, he too leaving out the front door. Arietta promptly turned around and made her way further into the mansion.

"So it seems Ion is here," Jade spoke up once he was sure they were gone. "This could be an excellent chance for us to rescue him, especially now that Dist and Sync are gone."

"Team up on Arietta, huh?" Guy contemplated for a moment. "That might work, assuming she doesn't have a hoard of monsters with her."

"A large number of monsters would draw too much attention." Jade provided, "I expect she's travelling with a minimal amount of protection."

"You're probably right," Tear agreed. "So where do we go from here?"

"Asch?" Jade turned his attention to the eldest sibling. "Where does that hallway lead?"
Asch thought about it for a moment, contemplating long enough that Jade was momentarily intrigued by the difficulty such a simple question seemed to have posed. "The roof," he finally answered.

"Is there any other way to get up there?"

"No, not that I know of."

"Alright then," Jade began to move towards the stairs. "I'd have preferred to cut her off, but if there's no other way, we'd best get this over with before Sync and Dist return."

"Good point." Guy said as the rest of them followed suit, down the stairs and into the entryway. "We wouldn't stand much of a chance against all three of them now would we?"

"I dunno," Anise replied. "From what I hear, Dist isn't much of a fighter and Gloomietta isn't good at much other than whining. It's too bad Sync makes up for the both of them, he's really good."

"Gloomietta?" Asch inquired.

"She must mean Arietta the Wild," Guy offered.

"They must have some fighting capacity; they wouldn't be God-Generals without some talent in battle. What do you think Luke?" Tear asked remembering Luke's complaints about always being left out the previous night.

Tear didn't get an answer. Luke had stopped and was staring at the main doors that were now on their right, completely oblivious to what the others were talking about. The rest of the party also stopped, wondering what he possibly found interesting about the large doors.

"Luke? What's the matter-"

The two doors flew open and before anyone had the chance to react, Sync and Dist both burst into the room. Without wasting a second, Sync shot through the group, landing a well placed blow to Asch's stomach, knocking him out cold. Luke instantaneously drew his sword, but before he had the chance to react, Sync had already take Asch beyond his reach.

"Fools," Sync taunted as Dist relieved him of his burden. "Did you think we hadn't noticed you spying on us? Lucky for you, we have all we need for now! You get to live few more hours. Be grateful."

"Get back here!" Luke cried, but Sync and Dist retreated as quickly as they had burst in. Dammit! How had they fallen for such an obvious trap?

"What the hell?" Guy exclaimed still in shock.

"This makes no sense at all," Anise interjected. "Why go after Asch and leave the rest of us? We're all just as able to rescue Ion, why didn't they try and stop us?"

"That's a very good question," Jade conceded. "Any ideas Asch?"

Asch didn't answer, and remained staring at the path to the basement, the sword in his hand trembling. The anger rolled off of in such a manner no one dared to think of crossing him in that moment.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! You did it again?" Anise cried out.
"What the hell were you thinking?" Guy grabbed Asch by the collar of Luke's jacket that he was wearing. "You knew something was going to happen? How could you put Luke in danger like that?"

"I don't get it, why don't you trust Master Van?" Luke climbed the stairs on the way back up to the room where everyone crashed for the night. The moonlight now gently trickled into the mansion giving everything an eerie look.

"I have my reasons, just…trust me, and be careful. We don't know who is behind all this or what they're planning. I have a feeling I might be their next target, so we all have to stay on our toes."

"Then let's switch places again."

"What?" The suggestion actually took Asch by surprise. "Why would you want to switch? I just finished telling you I'm the one they're after."

"Well it's important that you stay safe."

"You moron, it's more important that you stay safe."

"Come on Asch please? Let me do this. You've helped me out a lot. Besides… if I was captured, you're much better suited to rescue me, than I am to rescue you."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, you're stronger than I am, and you're much better at coming up with ideas and stuff than I am. I'm really just a tag-a-long. They need your help to stop the war."

"No you're not. You're just as important as everyone else is. Besides, didn't you promise Ion? I'm not going to put you in danger."

"Asch… please. I don't like admitting it, but if they have Ion, we really can't afford to lose you, right? That's why you think you'll be the next target. Besides, it'll help me make up for being a jerk earlier."

"How can you put yourself in danger like that?"

"Because I know if something happens, you'll come save me."

"And if I don't?" Asch taunted playfully.

"You'd better!" An indignant Luke cried out.

"I still don't like it." Asch shook his head, serious again.

"I'll be fine… trust me."

Asch was silent for a long time.

"Fine."

Asch returned Guy's accusations with a glare and in a single swift movement, detached Guy's grip and threw him to the ground.
"Don't move yet Asch," Jade protested sternly before Asch could go anywhere. "Before anyone takes any action, I want some answers. You obviously knew that something was amiss."

"I don't have time for that old man," Asch shot darkly. He motioned after Luke but was met with a well-placed fonic arte that knocked him several paces backwards. "Damn you, Jade!"

"Like it or not, you will make time for this. If you know something about the enemy we don't I'll have it out of you one way or another," Jade replied coldly.

"I don't trust Van," Asch finally spat.

"I think Luke is the only one who does trust Commandant Grants. You'll need to do better than that." Jade returned.

Asch let out a frustrated sigh. "Van's obviously keeping something from us. First of all, he gave us all tickets to the ferry in Kaitzur."

"I don't get it," Anise interjected. "What's so suspicious about giving us ferry tickets?"

"Nothing's suspicious about giving us ferry tickets, but he gave us all tickets. How did he know how many of us there were?"

"He's right." Tear finally saw where Asch was heading with this. "As far as Van knew, there should only be me, Luke, Asch and Guy. He shouldn't have any way of knowing Jade and Anise were with us."

"Second of all," Asch continued, "in Akzerieuth, he said he had to leave right away to catch up with Arietta. Not one of us actually told him it was Arietta that had Ion. Whether all this is on his orders or not, I don't know, but he still has more information than he should. Someone is reporting to him."

"You raise valid points," Jade commented, impressed on how much Asch had picked up. He too had noticed the mentioning of Arietta, but even he hadn't thought of the ferry tickets. "What I still don't understand," he continued. "Is why were they after you? Why you and not Luke?"

To that question, Jade never got an answer.

"It's not working!" Dist whined as he tweaked the controls a little more, frustrated by the lack of progress. His voice echoed in the large basement room, reverberating off the fon machines. "Sync!"

"For the last time Dist, I did everything exactly like you told me to!" Sync eyed the boy from head to toe once more for good measure. They had discarded his jacket, tossing it off to the side and he was firmly attached to the fon machine, his limbs each carefully placed in accordance with the glyphs that were now glowing a soft green.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Sync inquired impatiently. They were quickly running out of time, the rest of the group would undoubtedly be here soon.

"Of course I know what I'm doing!" Dist shouted back. "It makes no sense! According to this data, everything should be working, but the data is incompatible with the process! Grrr It must have been that Jade! That duplicitous snake! I'll bet he did something to it!"

"Well hurry up! I think I hear them coming." Sync shouted down to Dist.
"I don't understand! Why won't it work? Everything else is right!" Dist cried in frustration as he realized he wouldn't be able to finish as he too heard the telltale sounds of the others getting closer.

"It's no use, we'll have to retreat for now, what we have should be good enough for the time being," Sync called to Dist. Dist gave the controls on last frustrated pound before removing the fon disk and tossing it to Sync.

"I don't think so!" Sync jump backed just in time to dodge the blond's swing. In his haste however, he dropped the fon disk, a prize that was quickly claimed by his attacker.

"What's this?" Guy held up the fon disk.

"You're not paying attention!" Sync attacked Guy's opening, but before he could get any closer, a fonic arte exploded in the air before him throwing him back. Sync quickly recovered mid-air and landed on the opposite edge.

"Who's not paying attention?" Jade taunted. "Oh my, look what we have here." Jade snatched the disc from Guy and held it up tauntingly.

"Curse you Jade! Return that at once!"

"My, my, you certainly haven't changed one bit, Dist the Runny."

"It's Dist the Rose!"

"You know each other, Colonel?"

"Yes," Dist replied. "Sadly I once counted that beastly Jade among my friends."

"You must have the wrong person then, I certainly don't know any Jades with such horrible taste in friends," Jade shot back.

"Forget it Dist," Sync cut in, even he could only take so much of this. "This wasn't an authorized mission, we'll retreat for now. I'm certain Arietta will be more than happy to care of them for us." Without another word, the two God-Generals were gone.

Everything was dark. His senses began to waken but his eyelids were heavy, they refused to open, shrouding him in darkness. When had he closed them? Everything was so foggy... he couldn't remember. It was like the last time... like last night. No, it wasn't like before. It wasn't warm and comforting... This time it was cold, echoing an ancient pain that made him want to scream. Where was he? Where was everyone?


"Is he alright?" Jade inquired.

"Yeah, he's fine," Asch confirmed.

"He doesn't look fine to me." Guy protested.

"He'll be okay, he's just a bit out of it," Asch replied calmly, his attention never leaving Luke. How he knew exactly what was wrong, he wasn't sure, but he did. Asch could sense Luke's state of mind
with a clarity he found startling. He'd always some vague idea how Luke seemed to be feeling, almost like he could read his sibling's aura, but this was different somehow. Every slither of worry that tried to consume him was snuffed out by this peculiar new feeling. He knew. Luke would be fine. "He just needs a bit to snap out of it," the older redhead finally provided.

"This may sound cruel, but we don't have that kind of time to waste," Jade informed him.

"I know," Asch answered, "You guys go ahead and rescue Ion, I'll stay here with Luke, and we'll catch up as soon as we can."

"Are you sure you'll be okay just the two of you?" Anise asked worriedly.

"We'll be fine," Asch answered as he gratefully accepted his own coat that Tear had retrieved from across the room and quickly threw it over his shoulders.

"No one is going to lay a finger on him." Asch stated venomously, and in that moment, not even Jade would have tried.

"I'm not really comfortable leaving the two of them alone like that," Guy protested as they followed the path to the rooftop. "What if Sync and Dist come back?"

"Guy, I highly doubt there is a soul in the world, including Van Grants himself, that would dare lay a finger on Luke right about now," Jade teased.

"Yeah, Asch looked pretty scary down there," Anise agreed.

"He's very protective of Luke," Tear commented.

"He is," Guy agreed. "He's always been like that, ever since they were kids. I don't know why though; I'd have thought if anything, it would be the opposite."

"Why's that?" Anise inquired.

"No reason really." Guy shrugged.

"Oh come on, why not?" Anise insisted. "I don't have any brothers or sisters, but I didn't think it was that weird for the older sibling to be the protective one."

"Really, it's nothing," Guy laughed nervously, trying to dismiss the issue. "Asch just never struck me as the protective type until I saw how he acted around Luke."

"You mean, you knew Asch before you knew Luke?" Anise asked incredulously. "Those two have been apart for more than a few days?"

"No, that's not what I meant," Guy interjected.

"Well what did you mean?" Anise asked her voice rising in frustration.

"Let's just say that Asch when he's around Luke is a completely different person than when he's not around Luke, and leave it at that."

"Cop out," Anise hissed under her breath. He didn't mean a damn word of it. It bothered her now, she really wanted to know what he meant! The way Asch protected Luke like his life depended on it just seemed to fit. She couldn't even imagine him being any other way, so just why did Guy, someone who knew them best of all, think it weird that Asch was protective?
"That's enough chatter for now." Jade quieted them as the next door led to their destination. Jade gave them the sign, and all four of them burst out on to the roof.

The roof was in as much disrepair as the rest of the mansion, making it a very dangerous place to be. There were already several spots where the stone had given away, and others that looked like it wouldn't take much to cave them in. Their targets stood in the center of the open roof, where two large monstrous blue birds were patiently sitting.

"Careful Ion," Arietta said as she gently helped Ion up onto the back of one of the large birds.

"Stop right there Gloomietta! Let Ion go!" Anise yelled at the young God-General.

"Arietta," Ion pleaded from atop of the girl's monster friend. "Please let me go with them; you should know how important it is that we stop this war."

"Sorry Ion," Arietta replied returning her attention to the young Fon Master Guardian. "I'll never let you have him Anise! I'd never leave Ion with you and those murderers!"

"That's the second time you've called us that," Tear pointed out remembering their brief encounter on the Tartarus. "We aren't murderers."

"Yes you are! You killed mommy!"

"We've never hurt your mother," Tear said, trying to reason with the young girl who was growing more upset by the second. "I'm not sure what happened to her, but-"

"You did so! Mommy just wanted to hatch her eggs in peace, to raise my brothers and sisters after their home was burnt down by the cheagles. But you went into her home and you killed her!"

"She couldn't possible mean…the liger queen?"

"Yeah she does," Anise answered, "Gloomietta here was raised by monsters. The only reason she ever made it into the Oracle Knights was because she could talk with monsters."

"That's not true Anise! I was Ion's Fon Master Guardian before you were! He picked me himself before you were ever more than some worthless trainee!"

"Oh yeah? Well who's his guardian now?"

"I'm going to kill you all and avenge mommy! Then Ion and I-" Arietta stopped. "What is so funny Anise?" Anise couldn't help herself anymore; it had taken enough effort to keep it at a smirk for this long.

"Are you alright Ion?" The voice made Arietta spin around.

"I'm fine, thank you Luke. Its good to see you two are doing well." Ion responded with a smile as he was quickly escorted by the two redheads back over to the group. While Arietta had been distracted, the twins had decided to make use of the opportunity to help Ion down off the monster.

"Give Ion back to me!" Arietta shrieked in anger.

"Not a chance, Gloomietta." Anise taunted. "It looks like you don't make a very good Fon Master Guardian anymore."

"You will return Ion to me, or I'll raze Kaitzur to the ground!" Arietta demanded.
"You will do no such thing," the familiar deep voice commanded from behind them.

"Com-Commandant!" Arietta stepped back nervously.

"Arietta! Who gave you these orders? You're completely out of line!" Van scolded her.

"I-I'm sorry, it's just that-"

Arietta suddenly found herself pinned under Asch's blade. She had left her guard down a second too long, and Asch knew the opportunity likely wouldn't arise again. He raised his sword. Best end it now before someone ended up getting hurt. Or worse...

"Stop!" Luke and Ion's simultaneous cry echoed across the rooftop and Asch stayed his hand.

"Please don't hurt her!" Ion begged.

"Don't kill her!" Luke also yelled, still in pure shock at Asch's rash action.

Asch slowly let her up, but didn't sheathe his blade. Jade was impressed, had Asch not made a move, he might have done the same thing. Despite his brother's and the Fon Master's protests, it was a smart move on his part. Best eliminate the threat while they had the chance, cruel though it may be; saving lives and stopping the war came first. He hadn't lost all those men on the Tartarus for nothing.

"So what do you want to do with her then?" Asch inquired.

"We'll take her back to Daath, where she will face a court inquiry," Ion stated simply.

"If that is your decision Fon Master, then I will take her into my custody," Van offered.

"Please do," Ion replied gratefully before anyone could get out a single word of protest.

"I have a coach waiting nearby to return us to Kaitzur Port; would you like to return with me Fon Master?"

"No thank you Van, I think I'll travel with Luke and his friends. I do believe we have some catching up to do."

"As you wish Fon Master, we shall await your arrival then," Van said with a small bow. Picking Arietta up and restraining her, he led her from the roof, her two monsters taking off into the sky.

"That turned out for the best," Guy commented once the two had disappeared back into the manor.

"Indeed," Tear agreed. "Thanks to Luke and Asch we were able to rescue Ion, but how did the two of you get behind her like that?"

"There are two ways up to the roof," Asch answered, a smug grin still adorning his face in light of their recent victory. "Luke didn't know about it since he hasn't been here in a long time."

"Oh that's right," Tear mumbled. She'd already forgotten they had switched places earlier.

"We should be on our way if we wish to arrive before sunset," Jade interrupted, noting the sun that was already high in the sky.

"Huh?" Luke shook his head, snapping him out of whatever daydream he was lost in. "Yeah! I'm coming!"

"Did they scramble your brains with that thing or what?" Asch teased.

"Not really," Luke answered still lost in thought. Asch was set back by his lack of reaction.

"Still feel kinda out of it?"


"Give it a bit," Asch suggested, "They probably gave you something to keep you from waking up sooner. It should wear off after awhile."

No, that wasn't it. Well, it might have been the case. It would certainly explain why his head still danced in circles here and there, but that wasn't why he was lost in thought. He just couldn't get that image out of his mind. Of Asch attacking Arietta like that. Luke had never seen Asch be that ruthless. The Asch Luke knew was a warm and kind older brother; sure he picked on Luke and liked to make things needlessly difficult but... he was still someone who was always protecting him, who always looked out for him. This cold, heartless Asch that had pinned down a defenceless girl no older than himself... who was ready to kill her without a moment's thought... it was someone completely foreign to Luke... and Luke didn't like it.

"Okay?" Asch inquired, poking him in attempt to get a response. Luke put on a smile.

"Okay."

"I'm sorry," Ion broke the silence as the setting sun outlined the Kaitzur naval port that sat on horizon. He turned to the blond who was keeping pace next to him. "I don't believe we've been introduced.

"Oh that's right!" Amidst the chaos Luke had completely forgotten that Guy had arrived after Ion's untimely kidnapping. "I'm sorry!"

"The name's Guy," the blond answered with a laugh. "I work for Duke Fabre, I'm Luke's attendant."

"Oh really?" Ion inquired.

"Yeah, why do you ask?"

"Forgive my rudeness," Ion said quickly. "Given your lack of formality, I presumed you stood on more equal footing."

"Guy's been my friend for ages," Luke provided with a grin. It was obvious, if only by the young noble's expression that Guy wasn't simply another servant in the household.

"Much to Father's dismay," Asch tossed in.

"That makes sense," Ion said with a smile.

"Say Ion?" Luke casually placed his arms behind his head as they walked.

"What is it Luke?"
"I was just kinda wondering... what did they do with you that whole time?"

"I'm sorry Luke, but that's something that's confidential to the Order. I can't tell you that."

"It's a secret huh? I guess that's okay." Luke sighed, a bit disappointed that he didn't get an answer.

"Giving up so easily?" Guy laughed "That's not like you; you usually like to prod for hours until someone eventually tells you." Asch couldn't resist a small snicker. Too many memories of his childhood concurred with that statement.

Luke simply shrugged and continued to walk alongside his friends. He wasn't going to prod. Part of him wanted to, and another part of him was disappointed that Ion wouldn't confide in him, but Luke had been reminded all too recently how precious some secrets could be. Everybody has their own secrets, things they held onto that they just couldn't share. Maybe Asch was no different... he had his secrets too. Looking over at Asch, every bit of the dark stranger he'd witnessed earlier had vanished and noticing Luke's gaze, Asch offered him a warm smile. That's right, everyone had their own secrets, their own connections.

Things they could never tell a soul.
Broken Mirror

The sunrise danced across the water as the ferry departed from the Kaitzur docks. After spending the night in port, everyone comfortably settled into one of the many rooms at their disposal for the duration of the trip.

Ever since their arrival in Kaitzur Port, Van had been conspicuously absent. Had it not been for Jade spotting him board with Arietta still in custody that morning, they would have wondered if he had missed the ship altogether. It certainly was a troublesome fact. Jade would much rather have the man somewhere where he knew what he was doing. Better yet, he'd rather have Van somewhere he'd be forced to answer each and every question on the steadily growing list at the back of Jade's mind. The more he thought on their circumstances, the more he wanted to steal a moment with the mysterious Commandant, but such fortune wasn't shining on him this morning, and Van was no where to be found.

In spite of everyone's reservations about the man, the lot of them were in a pretty good mood. The recently returned Ion had become the center of attention and he probably couldn't have detached Anise from him even if he had wanted to. In fact the only person happier to see him back than Anise, was Luke.

The redhead had been positively thrilled at the Fon Master's return and both of them had been chatting well into the night until Tear and Anise came in and put a stop to it. Something about getting some much needed rest. Jade didn't see a problem with it, the ferry ride should provide ample opportunity to catch up on sleep. The two girls however, seemed inclined to disagree, and far be it from him to interrupt them while they ensured the wellbeing of their respective charges.

"Fon Master," Jade interrupted the discussion, when the idea of exploring the ship came up. Before he let them go on their merry way, there were a few things he wanted to know.

"Yes?" Ion looked up. "What is it Jade?"

"I realize you can't tell us what you have been doing during your absence-" Jade paused, wondering if Ion just might divulge something.

"No I'm afraid I can't."

"That's fine," Jade stated, adjusting his glasses. Clearly he'd have to alter his strategy. "Can you at least tell us where they took you? Hopefully it won't be necessary, but should the God-Generals decide to take you on another field trip, I'd rather not leave finding you to chance."

Ion sighed deeply, contemplating Jade's request. The internal struggle between guarding the Order's secrets and his desire to be of assistance was written across his face. "We went to the Sephiroth," Ion finally offered.


"The Sephiroth are the world's ten most powerful fon slots. They're places where memory particles concentrate and fonons gather easily," Asch answered.

"Oh yeah! I remember now. Man that was a boring lecture!"

"It might be more interesting if you were awake," Asch said with a jab.
"I was not sleeping!" Luke protested. "So what if my memory isn't as good as yours?"

"Right, so pacing my notes to the sound of your snoring was clearly my imagination."

"So what? I just don't get what's so interesting about fon slots. It doesn't really have much application if you're not a fonist anyway, right?"

"Actually Luke, it has a great many practical applications," Ion replied. "Take the Planet Storm for example, without the fon slots that power it, there would be no fonons to provide energy. In a sense everything on this planet is dependent on the existence of fon slots, even if they don't directly utilize their own."


"You're hopeless," Asch muttered.

"Actually, on the topic of fon slots," Luke continued. "How are you making out with that fon slot seal, Jade? I mean, are you making any progress with it at all?"

"Why, are you worried about me?" Jade taunted.

"Not especially," Luke shrugged it off, "I was just- well- you know..."

"Thank you for your concern Luke," Jade said, somewhat sincerely this time. "But a fon slot seal is like a lock, with a code that changes periodically. I'm working on it, but it will be awhile until it's completely undone."

"Oh. Okay."

"Hey Guy?" Anise spoke up. The blond in question had been quiet the entire time and seemed to be focused on whatever he had sitting on the table in front of him. With his back to everyone, he was oblivious to the world, Anise's query included. Rather irate at being ignored, Anise decided to take the direct approach.

"Watcha got there?" Anise chirped cheerfully as she jumped onto Guy's back, her arms wrapping around his neck. Even from across the room, everyone could see Guy freeze. He slowly turned his head and next thing anyone knew, Anise was on the floor, having overturned a few chairs on her way there, and Guy was in the corner, curled up and shaking.

"What the hell are you doing?" Asch yelled at Guy, extending a hand to help the young Fon Master Guardian up. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Anise replied, quickly shifting her leg as to hide the trickle of blood coming out of the cut she had incurred from her fall.

"What's wrong?" Ion inquired.

"Yes, that's more than just a startled reaction," Jade commented. "And far beyond a simple aversion to females."

"I-I'm sorry. I just...reacted. I can't help it. I'm sorry Anise."

"Don't worry about it." Anise replied.

"Ah, so this was the cause of the commotion." Jade picked up the fon disc from the ground. It was the same one he had returned to Guy after using it to taunt Dist.
"Yeah, I was kind of curious as to what's on it," Guy replied. His words caught the attention of both redheads.

"Well, when we reach Chesedonia, we can get it checked out." Jade suggested. Asch and Luke caught each other's eye. This was going to be a fun mess to get out of.

"Anise, you're bleeding!" Ion exclaimed, drawing everyone's attention away from the fon disk for now.

"I'm fine Ion, don't worry. It's just a scratch." Anise cheerfully insisted.

"But it could get infected if it's not treated properly." Ion argued. Accepting some bandages from Tear, he began properly dressing the wound. "There," he stood up once he was finished, "that should do for now."

"Th-Thank you Ion," Anise stuttered, blushing.

"I'm really sorry Anise," Guy repeated. "I wasn't like this when I was a kid."

"What do you think started it then?" Tear inquired curiously. Guy shifted uncomfortably but didn't answer. "I'm sorry, that was inconsiderate of me." Tear apologized after a moment.

"Oh give me a break," Asch muttered. "How about one of these days you just grow a spine before you seriously hurt someone?"

"Asch!" Anise exclaimed. She was appalled by his statement. Sure it seemed like a dumb thing to be afraid of, but even she could tell he had a very good reason for it, even if he didn't feel like sharing it. It was written all over his face. Asch couldn't seriously have missed that fact, not living in the same mansion. Why was he being such a jerk?

"So it's a fear. Get over it," Asch continued. "Yeah it's all fine and well to be afraid of something, but when people are getting hurt, just because some girl touched you? It's pathetic. Then you expect to have everyone tiptoe on eggshells about it afterwards? Get real. Deal with it instead of running away like some coward."

The room was completely silent and Anise didn't dare breathe for fear of snapping the tension. Somehow she was getting the impression, if only from the aura of hatred radiating off Guy and Asch, that if it did there would be a bloodbath. This went way beyond her scrapping her leg on the floor. There was some serious bad blood between those two and she didn't want to be around when it all spilled over. Much to her relief, Guy didn't respond in any way. Instead he muttered something about needing some air, and was gone before anyone could say a word.

"I think that's a good idea," Jade agreed, his own disapproving glare never leaving Asch. "I think we could all use some fresh air, and a chance to unwind." He left, and everyone else was just as eager to escape the room, leaving only Luke and Asch in the haze of tension that had yet to disperse.

"Hmph, fine be that way," Asch scoffed at the metal door that closed behind his travel companions.

"It's your own fault," Luke spat. He was just as angry as everyone else, if not even more so at how Asch had treated Guy. "Why the hell do you always have to be so mean to Guy?"

"What do you mean always? How would you know? You're only seven. You have no idea what went on before then!"
"That doesn't matter. You have no excuse to treat him like crap!"

"Why the hell do you care, he's just a servant."

"He is not just a servant!" Luke yelled, outraged.

"He is so!"

"Then what am I? Just your brother? Just your replica? You think you're so much better then everyone else! So much more important! Maybe you are important, but guess what? That doesn't mean you get to treat the rest of the world like the dirt under your boots!"

"What the hell do you know?"

"I know you'd never treat Natalia's servants like that!"

"You leave her out of this!" Asch threatened venomously.

"Yeah well until you learn to treat the people important to me with a little respect, I'll say whatever the hell I please!"

"Important to you? You mean the people who spoil you!"

"That is not true!"

"Yes it is! You only defend him because of the way he dotes on you day and night!"

"And how would you know? You can't spend 10 seconds with him without making one of those snide remarks of yours!"

"Don't talk like you know everything!" Asch shouted.

"Then why don't you grow up and be a bit more responsible!"

"Don't give me crap about responsibilities when you don't even have a future!"

A cold silence fell over them both.

Luke didn't answer, but the fury and hurt in his eyes was more then enough for Asch to know that his hit had landed. After a moment, Luke spun around and stormed out of the room slamming the door behind him. Asch cringed as the door flew shut. Well, now everyone on the ship knew something was up.

Asch almost regretted what he had said. It had been a low blow, to a subject that he knew was sensitive to begin with. That was the most hurt he'd seen Luke in a long time. Maybe he had gone a bit too far this time. No; Asch shook off the feeling, dismissing his tugging conscience.

Let him be that way. He had more important things to deal with than Luke's temper tantrums.
Tear slowly walked along the deck of the ship, allowing her hand to softly graze the railing. The cool ocean breeze felt nice and blew her long hair out behind her. Though it was now closer to mid-day, the light still danced across the water and Tear happily watched it. It put her mind at ease.

Her brother's continued absence worried her. Everyone knew Van was onboard, but they had yet to see him. He knew of the tirade of questions and accusations that he would face the second any of them had his attention for any length of time; of that Tear had no doubt. Nor did she doubt that this was the reason behind his mysterious absence.

She didn't trust her brother any further than she could throw him. Which was probably a good thing, as the thought of throwing him overboard was rather appealing at this point in time, if only to relieve the tension that his presence had brought over them all. Tear recalled all too well the shouting match that had gone on after they'd left the cabin earlier. She may not have been able to make out what had been said, but there was no mistaking the emotions behind the words. A painful reminder of what such tensions could do to even the closest of people.

It was Luke's presence on the port side of the ship that eventually stopped Tear's aimless wandering. He was slumped down against the railing and staring aimlessly out at the water, devoid of the cheer she'd so often associated with him. It was strange to see him like that, if nothing else Luke had always been energetic, but watching him stare at the horizon, he just looked sad. It didn't take the familiar golden trinket he fiddled unconsciously with to tell Tear why Luke seemed so upset, but Tear didn't know nearly enough about their situation to risk trying to talk to him about it.

"So I hear this is your first time on a boat," Tear said as she joined him against the railing. "Are you enjoying yourself?" Stupid! Tear silently berated herself. That was the last question she should have asked.

"Who told you that?" Luke asked, his voice quietly confirming his solemn mood.

"Um...Guy did," Tear responded hesitantly, unsure how to reply without digging the hole she was in any deeper.


"He was upset, but he seems fine now. Come to think of it, I haven't seen him around in awhile. Maybe he went back to his room." Tear shrugged.

"That's good." Luke smiled, but it wasn't his usual cheerful smile, there was still an underlying sorrow Tear couldn't quite reach. Taking one last look at his locket, Luke scoffed angrily and stuffed the charm back into his pocket.

"Wait!" Tear reached out, and then retreated a bit when she realized what she had done. Luke looked up at her curiously, his hand still half in his pocket. "Umm..." she hesitantly continued, unsure how to proceed tactfully with her request. "Well if you don't mind... I mean... if it's okay with you... do you think I could see it?" Tear finally got out, she could feel her face flushing. Honestly what was with her? There was no reason for her to meddle in his personal affairs.

"Sure." Luke smiled a bit more, amused at her embarrassment. He removed the locket from his pocket and passed it to Tear.
The small golden locket sparkled in the afternoon sun. It was old; even Tear, who had little experience with such things, could tell that much. The closer you looked, the more you could tell that it had lost its lustre, and that it was covered in scratches. Despite its wear, it was still beautiful. On the back was a flame, set using bronze and silver that burned against the gold in which it was laid.

Tear flipped the locket over, and took a closer look at the picture on the other side. The picture was almost as worn as the locket, and was starting to fade around the edges. It was strange, the picture she had so easily mistaken for Luke in the Cheagle Woods, now so very obviously wasn't. The boy in the picture was probably about 12 and had crimson red hair that fell just past his shoulders. He was looking directly at whoever had taken the picture, but he had a gentle smile. Not the bright, cheerful, somewhat carefree grin that often graced Luke's face, but still the smile of a boy who was happy, despite the many other troubles he may have.

"So, this is a picture of Asch?" Tear asked softly. Stupid! She berated herself for the second time in the past five minutes. Why didn't she stop and think before asking questions?

"Yeah," Luke replied, glancing over her shoulder as she continued to look at his treasure.

"What happened here?" Tear gently fingered a rough spot along the edge of the frame where the hinge should be.

"That locket used to belong to Mother," Luke explained, leaning back to stare at the sky. "She loved that picture of the two of us; she took it with her everywhere. Then one day, it broke in half while she was playing with us. Instead of being upset, she just took the two pieces and gave us both the half with the other in it. She said to hold onto it tightly, because it was our greatest treasure," Luke chuckled. "I don't understand what she meant, but I've been hanging onto it ever since. It used to be embarrassing to carry it around, but... the way she had treasured it so much, I just could never bring myself not to, you know?"

"I can understand that." Tear held the locket a bit closer. "I once had something very precious to me."

"Really? What was it?" Luke inquired curiously. "I mean... if you don't mind telling me."

"Not at all," Tear smiled softly. "It was a pendant that belonged to my mother. I never knew my parents; they died when I was really young. It's always been just Van and me. I still loved that pendant; it was the only piece of them that I had."

"What ever happened to it?" Luke asked, pausing uncomfortably when Tear didn't answer. Luke thought on it a moment, he remembered Tear having a pendant, but...

"Hey, it wasn't the one you gave that coachman back in Tataroo Valley was it?" No answer; Luke didn't like the implications of her silence. "Why would you do that?"

"Because there wasn't any other way," she responded solemnly.

"Of course there was another way! We could have walked, we could have negotiated or something!" Luke's outrage quieted instantly. "We could...we could have done something. You shouldn't have had to sacrifice something so precious, and for me, who you barely even knew."

"It was my responsibility," Tear answered simply.

"Then I'll get it back for you. Someday we'll find that coachman and get your pendant back." Luke decided.
Tear bit her lip to the point where she could almost taste blood. Luke was so upset and so worried for her sake, over the loss of her treasure. The harsh words she had spoken to him in the Cheagle Woods echoed in her mind and just how thoughtless she had been downright disgusted her. She had been so petty and shallow, over something so important to him. She carefully handed the locket back to him, no longer able to look him in the eye.

She began to walk away, but stopped. She turned around and bowed deeply. "I'm sorry Luke," Tear muttered before running off to attend to something- anything else, leaving a somewhat confused Luke in her wake.

Luke stood dumbfounded for a moment his locket in hand, looking at the spot in which Tear had been standing just a moment ago. What had gotten into her all of a sudden? Oh well, Luke returned to slumping against the railing and staring out at the sea, placing his locket back in his pocket.

Luke let out a frustrated sigh. This was pointless, and it wasn't helping his mood. Not that he expected anything to improve his deteriorating mood, but speaking with Tear had done a surprisingly good job of it. Now, with her abrupt departure, whatever good cheer she had brought also left. Luke stood up and followed the railing all the way to the bow of the ship, allowing himself to sulk the entire way. It helped a little, but Luke still had tons of pent up frustration and absolutely no way to vent it.

*Just relax.*

What?

"*Just relax, and focus. You can feel them can't you?*" Asch calmly coached Luke for the seventh time that night.

"*I still don't get what you're talking about.*" Luke cracked an eye open to see what his elder sibling was up to. Asch was standing a few feet away, watching him with his arms crossed.

"*Look. For a hyperresonance to occur, you need a large number of Seventh Fonons. You're never going to be able to pull it off unless you first learn how to properly gather those fonons.*"

"*Well I know that, but-*"

"*Focus! You've seen firsthand just how powerful the Seventh Fonon can be if not properly controlled. If you really want to learn how to control a hyperresonance, then you need to learn to focus. Otherwise you're just a danger to yourself and everyone around you!*"

*Luke took a deep breath, calmed himself down, and tried again.*

Great, why of all things did that particular memory have to pop up? Why did Luke have to think about him? He'd barely dismissed the thought and he could already feel his mood souring. Leave it to Asch to be a total prick and ruin a perfectly good boat trip. After all the time they had spent working on his hyperresonance together too! Every night since their discussion after the Tartarus, once they were sure even Jade was asleep, they'd sneak off into the woods and get some practice in. Sometimes it was for a few hours, other times it was only 20 minutes or so, but it had become routine, and Luke had enjoyed it. Even their free day in Akzerieuth had been wasted away training, until a group of local kids had stumbled upon them, and they decided to call it a day. Stupid jerk. Obviously all of that meant absolutely nothing to him. Luke kicked a rock in frustration, watching it bounce across the deck before plummeting into the water.
Then again, maybe it wasn't such a bad idea after all. Practicing his hyperressonance always did do a good job of calming him down, and it wasn't like there was anyone else around to see him. At the very least it could distract him from the echoes of their argument that were still resonating within him. What had been said…hurt, and Luke was tired of dwelling on it.

Luke closed his eyes. He'd been getting better at sensing Seventh Fonons. There wasn't an abundance of them around this time, but that wasn't to say they were scarce either. There was an area on the other end of the ship where they were gathering readily, Tear perhaps, or even Asch. He had always noticed a stronger concentration of Seventh Fonons where his brother was concerned. Then again, every time he had bothered to look, there had always been some around him too. Maybe they were the same in that regard as well.

No! Luke immediately rejected the realization he'd stumbled upon. They weren't the same. He wasn't the same as Asch. Without even trying, the closest Seventh Fonons began to gather. Luke didn't want to be the same as him! He wasn't that mean or hurtful or completely selfish. More fonons gathered. He wasn't that way, he didn't want to be that way, he would never be that way! It was always about him, never anyone else. Asch didn't care. Asch never cared. He-

Suddenly, like a floodgate opening, Seventh Fonons flocked to him, far more than had ever answered his call. Far more than he was capable of handling. They swarmed him; drowning him in a mass of fonons that, no matter how hard he struggled, he couldn't fight his way out of. Then he found himself engulfed in a sea of gold, and a far too familiar head-splitting pain.

*My child. I have reached you at last.*

"What the-? Who the hell are you? What are you doing to me?" Luke could no longer move.

*You have found it. You have reached it. The power that is twin to my own.*

"What are you-?" Luke choked out before even his voice was no longer his own.

*Now show it to me.*

No- He couldn't. He couldn't unleash a hyperressonance here. That wasn't what he was trying to do! Half the boat would go with him, and whatever didn't blow up would sink! Luke slowly raised his arms, but it was no longer him that was doing it.

"Luke," a deep voice whispered in his ear, breaking the hold that this golden aura had on him. "Calm down Luke. There that's it." Luke could feel the fonons slowly start to dissipate. "Now, focus. Focus it all into the tips of your fingers." Luke did as he was instructed, and the sea of gold retreated, leaving darkness in its wake.

"Are you alright Luke?" Luke opened his eyes to see his sword instructor standing over him.

"Master Van!" Luke almost jumped up, having to stop to keep from falling over again due to the sudden rush of blood to his head.


"I- I don't know," Luke admitted sheepishly. "I was upset and then, it sort of happened." Luke didn't like lying to Master Van of all people, but he wouldn't even trust Tear with the truth of what he had been doing. At least what he said hadn't technically been a lie. "What was that?" Luke inquired, hoping that would detour Master Van from any further questioning.
Van eyed Luke for a moment before deciding that Luke seemed confused and worried enough about what had just happened to dismiss his initial concerns that it had all been intentional. Skills like that could be troublesome, if not downright dangerous. It seemed to be merely a fluke, no matter how much of a nuisance it might pose.

"I'm not certain, but perhaps it would be best for you to try to remain calm for the next little while."
Van finally replied. The less the boy knew, the better. "If you don't mind my asking, what had you so worked up?"


"Did you two have another argument?"

"No, just Asch being a total jerk, as usual."

"Is he treating you like you're inferior again?"

"Yes! Wait… what do you mean again?"

"You might think no one else notices, but I've seen the way he always treats you like you're not as important as he is."

"Really?"

"Of course. The way he acts isn't fair to you. Just because you're younger, doesn't mean you deserve any less respect."

"Yeah," Luke avidly agreed, "But… it's not like I can do anything about being the younger one."

"True," Van chuckled, "but there is still something you can do."

"There is? What?"

"This war," Van answered simply. "If you can help stop it from happening, then you can prove that you're just as important as Asch. Then you can earn their respect. You can gain the recognition you deserve, rather than let all the effort you've put into this get lost in Asch's shadow."

"You're right! I mean, I've put in my share of work into this journey too."

"Exactly. You are more than worthy of being his equal, and yet, he keeps you beneath him. Do you know why?"

"No… why?" Luke inquired.

"Because he can see your potential, and he's afraid of it. He knows that you could surpass him someday. You know what's going to happen as soon as you get back to Baticul-"

"Yes I know," Luke angrily cut Van off. Did everybody think he didn't have eyes? Because that was the only way he could not know what would happen when they got back to Baticul.

"Then, all the more, you need to prove yourself and surpass Asch, so that everyone can see you too. As Luke fon Fabre, not simply an extension of Asch."

"Thank you, Master Van."

"You're more than welcome Luke."
"Master Van? Can I ask you a question?"

"What is it?"

"Well, where have you been all this time? You've been on board since we left, but this is the first I've seen you."

"I've been personally guarding Arietta's cell to ensure she doesn't try anything."

"Why? I've seen lots of other soldiers onboard. Besides, I think the others wanted to talk to you about something."

"Thank you Luke, but I want to do this as a way to apologize for the trouble my men have caused you. They may not think it necessary, but it's something I'd like to do to try and make amends. It's the least I can do."

"Okay, I won't tell the others then."

"Thank you, until we reach Chesedonia, try to enjoy the rest of your trip. It's your first time on a boat after all."

"I'll try." Luke waved as Van returned below deck.

Luke stopped waving once Master Van was out of sight. There wasn't much chance of that happening, but he still appreciated the sentiment. At the very least Luke took some consolation in that he had a plan to get himself out of Asch's shadow. Until that actually happened though, he didn't expect to enjoy much of anything... especially considering who he had to deal with for the rest of the trip.

More than having to put up with his sibling for the rest of the trip, Luke was worried about what had just happened to him. Why had his hyperresonance failed like that? Sure he hadn't always gathered the necessary fonons, but nothing even remotely close to that had ever happened. What was so different this time?

*Let me try synching our fon slots. At the very least, it could help with our headaches.*

So in the end it really did come back to Asch.

"Aren't you ever scared?"

"Hm?" Asch looked down at Luke who was sitting down, resting against a cliff.

"Like, aren't you scared that you'll lose control and hurt someone?"

"A little, I guess. As long as you do everything like I explained it, the hyperresonance will never go further than you make it go."


"It's a dangerous power. There's a very good reason it's not used in battle, it could easily wipe out a country in a matter of days. That's not the kind of weapon you want to be carelessly flinging around. As long as you stay calm, and think everything through carefully, nothing bad will ever happen. You just need to believe in yourself. You can do this. I know that this is something you can master."

"Thanks."

Yeah right. Asch didn't want him to master it. Of course he didn't, it seemed so obvious now. Asch never wanted Luke to become as good or as talented as he was. Asch must have been getting worried, since Luke had been progressing in the training so well. So he went and synched their fon slots, throwing Luke completely off and putting him back at square one. He must have been getting desperate. Asch had to do something, or Luke might get better than he was, and in Asch's mind that couldn't be right.

After all, Luke was just his replica.
"I'll take Arietta on to Daath." The Commandant's voice barely rose above the hustle and bustle that was Chesedonia at midday. Hundreds of people filled the desert streets, coming and going, completely oblivious to the most recent group of newcomers. Tourists were hardly out of the ordinary in such a widely known center of commerce.

"Thank you Van," Ion replied, "Could you see to it that a court inquiry date is set for her as well?"

"Certainly Fon Master, shall I have it be for after your return?"

"If you could, that would be for the best."

"Then I'll see that it's done before coming to meet you in Baticul." Without another word, Van and his small entourage of Oracle Knights boarded the ship to Daath.

Stupid Commandant. Everyone watched him go in silence. In spite of their best efforts, not one of them had managed to track him down or corner him during the entire duration of the trip. In fact, that was the most they'd seen of him in three whole days. Then again, it wasn't the only new thing they were witnessing; Luke and Asch were standing within five feet of each other. They hadn't seen that in two whole days either. As good as they were at finding each other; they were as freakishly good at avoiding each other. Their paths hadn't crossed even once. The boat wasn't that big. Whatever it was they had been yelling about had them awfully mad. Not that Anise really minded of course, one less person to compete for Asch's attention.

Not that she'd really seen much of Asch during the trip either. He pretty much stuck to his room and wasn't much one for conversation, especially if the topic involved himself in any way. Luke on the other hand had been lots of fun to talk to. She had gotten to know him a lot better over the past few days, and it turned out he was a pretty nice guy... for a noble. They'd had lots of interesting conversations and Luke wasn't anywhere near as uptight as his older brother was. Oh, this wasn't any good! Now she was wondering which one she liked better!

"Well then," the Colonel spoke up, pushing his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. "Shall we be going? We won't get anything accomplished just standing around here."

"Yeah," Guy agreed. "I'd still like to get this fon disc checked out."

"Why don't we go visit Astor then?" Ion suggested, "If anyone around here has the resources to analyze that fon disc, it would have to be him."

"So who exactly is this Astor person?" Luke inquired.

"He's the head merchant and leader of Chesedonia." Tear replied.

"Chesedonia has its own leader?"

"Chesedonia is built on the border between Malkuth and Kimlasca and thrives as a trading center. It was declared an autonomous state by Daath so it's separate from either country. Chesedonia contributes large sums of money to Daath, and Daath defends it as its own self-governed state. Learn to read moron," Asch shot.

"I wasn't asking you!" Luke yelled back.
"Now, now boys," a female voice intervened. "Two men as handsome as you shouldn't be fighting."

The lady walked up to Luke, placing her hand gently on his shoulder. She was dressed in a grey cloak that was a bit tattered, but made of a light material. Under the hood that she kept pulled up, hid a head of vibrant pink hair and a pair of pink eyes that she bat periodically as she very obviously came onto the young noble.

Her interest was short lived, and she made her way over to his twin. "My, my, it must be my lucky day." She grinned as she seductively circled Asch, the same way she had circled Luke only seconds earlier. Unlike Luke who was still several shades of red from the unexpected flirt, Asch kept a serious look, his gaze never leaving the woman.

Anise was biting her lip. It would be unlady like to just burst out in public, but just what did that old hag think she was doing? "Hey!" She finally yelled; keeping her temper in check had never been one of her strong points anyway. "Get your hands off him!"

"Oh what's this? Jealous are we, little girl? Can't say I blame you, he is quite a catch. But it's time for you to leave the grownups alone now," the lady taunted.

"I think that's enough," Tear interjected. "We have important business to attend to, as I imagine you do as well," she managed in the most threatening voice that she could.

"Two against one huh? That's hardly fair," she replied, but backed off none-the-less. "Have a wonderful stay," she winked at the boys "I'm sure fate will allow us to meet again someday."

"Wait!" Tear yelled as the lady began to walk away.

"Oh?" she turned around. "Having second thoughts? I'm not usually one for that kind of thing, but…"

"How about before you leave, you return their wallets?" Jade finally provided as Tear fought through stuttering, having already turned purple in a mix of fury and embarrassment.

The lady's smile became a devilish smirk, "Or how about I don't?" She reacted quicker than any normal civilian could have, ripping off her cloak, which took the hit from both Tear's knife and Jade's spear. By the time the dust had settled she was gone.

"Hah! That's what you get for messing with Noir of the Dark Wings!" The lady reappeared a moment later on the roof of a nearby stall, just out of reach of any potential strike.


"Some bandits you are," Asch's sarcastic comment silenced Noir's laughing.

"You sure talk tough for someone who was just outplayed," Noir taunted.

"Outplayed? Who was outplayed?" Asch taunted back, revealing his own wallet in his hand.

"Why you-" Noir fumed from her spot on the rooftop.

"Oh and look at this." Asch continued pulling out Luke's wallet as well.

"What?" Noir yelled in outrage, gathering the attention of some of the nearby civilians.

"Of course, we couldn't have such a memorable encounter and not have a souvenir," Asch finished
revealing his third prize: Noir's own wallet, filled with her loot from the day.

Noir couldn't even speak she was so angry at being outsmarted and out conned by her latest victims. Asch continued to dangle the wallet tauntingly, nothing short of an evil grin gracing his face.

"How dare you do that to our boss!" Two men appeared at Noir's side, completing the 'two men and a woman' that Tear had heard of from the coachman in Tataroo Valley. Standing together, the three of them looked more like a circus troupe than any bandits she had ever seen.

"You'll regret messing with us!" The other man shouted, "You may have gotten the better of us today, but we'll get you back ten times over!" Their threat echoing in the plaza that had fallen silent in light of the commotion, save for a few local authorities making their way through the crowd. By the time they reached the source, the Dark Wings were already gone.

"Thank you," Jade said as he finished answering the officer's inquiries about their encounter. "Also could you point us in the direction of Astor's manor?"

Rather than answer, the officer was carefully peeking over Jade's shoulder at the scene behind him. "Umm… are those two going to be alright?" Jade looked over his shoulder.

"Give me back my wallet!" Luke yelled jumping at the leather pouch in Asch's hand.

"Give me one good reason to. If it wasn't for me you would have had it stolen anyways!" Asch sidestepped his sibling's attempt, leaving the younger redhead to crash on the street.

"You jerk!"

"Better that than stupid!"

"They'll be fine," Jade replied.

"Fon Master!" Astor greeted Ion with open arms, offering him and his guests a place to sit and a variety of refreshments. An offer they all gratefully took him up on. The juice, squeezed from the rare desert fruits, bore a flavour that exploded in their mouths while offering a welcome reprieve from the dryness of the harsh environment. Mieu in particular enjoyed the fresh vegetables that Astor provided, having found few things to his liking while out at sea.

The room in which they had settled was lavishly decorated with cloth and tapestries from all corners of Auldrant. Many forms of art could be found all over the interior of the manor, with many plants and flowers decorating the grounds. The colour and life of the manor made it a stark contrast to its desert backdrop. The officer hadn't exaggerated when he had told them 'you can't miss it.'

"If I had known you were coming I would have prepared something much grander and more befitting your stay here," Astor commented when everyone had finished their drinks and snacks.

"This is more than enough," Ion replied, "Besides, we're trying to keep a bit of a low profile."

"I see. So what brings you here then?"

"One of my friends has a request of you, if you could assist him?"

"Certainly, I'd be more than happy to," Astor answered with an astounding amount of vigour, and a
rather annoying laugh. "So what is it you need?"

"It's this fon disk," Guy spoke up, passing Astor the disk in question. "If possible, we'd like to see what's on it."

"Hmm," Astor held the disk up to the light before clapping his hands. "What do you think?" he asked, passing the disk to the man who had answered his summons.

"It seems to be slightly damaged, but it should still be capable of functioning. It may take a bit longer than usual to analyze though." The man replied.

"Alright, then begin right away."

"Sir." The man quickly departed from their company.

"I'm sorry, but it looks like its going to be awhile. Could you give us until morning?"

"That's fine." Jade replied, "Our ship doesn't depart until tomorrow morning anyway."

"Good! Then I will see you all in the morning. Would you like me to get someone to show you the way out?"

"No thank you," Tear replied standing up from the rather comfortable couch on which she had been sitting. "We can find the way ourselves, there's no need to trouble your staff."

"Yes, we'll let ourselves out if you don't mind." Ion agreed, also getting up, the rest of the group not far behind him. "We'll stop by in the morning then."

"I'll make sure everything is ready." Astor replied with another spurt of laughter.

"Thank you."

By the time they had found their way out of the manor, the sun was already beginning to set. Granted it had been midday when they had arrived, apparently Astor's manor wasn't the only site they 'couldn't miss' and they had seen their share of Chesedonia's sights before making their way to Astor's manor.

Luke had finally managed to get his wallet back, but not before making a huge scene in the middle of the city, and needless to say, relations between the two brothers weren't any better because of it. They now refused to talk to each other, which, despite how much Tear really hoped they'd make up soon, for the time being was a good thing. Their constant bickering was trying even her patience.

The walk to the inn was silent, and very awkward to say the least. No one said a word, not even Ion, who was the only one who had yet to give up on trying to get the boys to reconcile. The inn was modest, nothing like the extravagant manor in which they had been moments ago, but the rooms were a fair rate and big enough that they would only need two of them to sleep the entire group.

Just as silently everyone made their way up the stairs to the rooms they had been given. Luke and Asch instinctively reached for the same door handle. They froze, and their eyes met. Looking at each other for a moment, they simultaneously scoffed and turned away. They stood with their arms crossed looking away from the other and then at the same time, stomped off into separate rooms, slamming the doors behind them in one loud crash. As terrible as it was, Tear had to hold back a small laugh; even as mad as they were, they were still completely in sync.
"That went well," Jade commented after an awkward silence.

"Were we even watching the same people?" Anise shot back.

"I’m getting worried," Ion admitted. "They’ve been fighting for almost four days now."

"That’s true," Tear agreed. "I wonder if they’ve ever fought like this before. I mean, maybe they just don’t know how to apologize to each other."

"Now I know that’s not the case," Guy said with a chuckle.

"Oh? They’ve fought before then?" Ion inquired.

"Well yeah, of course." Guy provided, "I mean, they’re really close and all, but they’re still brothers. Though I have to admit, half the time they’ve fought and made up before anyone’s the wiser."

"But not this time."

"No, this is one of the biggest fights they’ve had in awhile."

"Yeah," Anise spoke up, the sound of the doors slamming still ringing in her ears, "They’re both really mad."

"I don’t like it when Master fights." Mieu contributed. "He gets all sad when he’s by himself. I don’t like it at all."

"They’ll make up eventually," Guy shrugged. "I’ve found the best way of dealing with it is not to get involved."

"But you’re Luke’s servant aren’t you?" Anise asked. "How can you let it go on like that?"

"Actually," Tear cut in, "I’ve wanted to ask you about that for awhile now. If you’re Luke’s attendant, then where is Asch’s? I would have thought he would have accompanied Asch from the start but we still should have met up with him by now."

"That’s true, it should be his attendant’s responsibility to accompany him and ensure his safety and wellbeing. We should have met them by now." Jade added tauntingly, clearly already knowing the answer.

"Actually," Guy shifted uncomfortably, "I technically answer to both Luke and Asch."

"Oh I get it; you work for both of them," Anise piped up, "So then why do you introduce yourself as Luke’s attendant?"

"I was originally assigned to Luke," Guy explained. "Asch refused to have an attendant of his own so I was assigned to him as more of a formality than anything. Luke was always been the one that needed help with things. Asch is more the independent type, so I always end up spending more time with Luke than with Asch."

"That’s good. I was starting to think you had something against him," Anise replied. "You know what?" She giggled. "I bet you Asch is just jealous."

"Jealous?" Tear inquired. "Why would Asch be jealous?"

"Well you heard him. He just said he spends more time with Luke than Asch. I bet Asch is
"That would make sense." Tear agreed.

"I really don't think that's it," Guy replied nervously.

"Well, now that that's all settled, all that's left is a bit of organizing, and we can be off to bed," Jade interjected.

"Colonel, what do you mean by organizing?"

"Why sleeping arrangements of course. With our twins here refusing to stay in the same room as each other, we'll have to reorganize who gets to sleep with whom."

Everyone simply stared at Jade. Could he possibly have made that sound any creepier?

"I don't think I should sleep in the same room as Asch." Guy spoke up.

"I'm in the same room as Ion!" Anise demanded. "And I want to sleep tonight, not listen to you and Asch have another one of your sarcasm wars," she added, her eyes fixed on Jade. "So you can sleep in Luke's room."

"Are you sure you don't want me to tuck you in? I could tell you some lovely bedtime stories," Jade replied tauntingly.

"I'll pass on the nightmares thanks."

"Oh I get it; you just want to spend the night with Asch uninterrupted," Jade continued in his creepy voice. "That's fine I suppose, Tear, you can sleep in the room with us."

"What? But Colonel!" Tear protested.

"Yeah. Come on Jade!" Guy was already shaking at just the thought of sleeping that close to a girl. He'd gotten a peak in the room when Luke had opened the door. The beds weren't nearly far enough apart for his sanity to remain intact.

Anise turned beet red and was positively fuming at being made fun of. "No way. Tear comes with us!" she finally managed.

"It's far too late to be changing sleeping arrangements now," Jade let out a fake yawn. "It's time we all went to bed." Jade finished as he let himself in Luke's room and closed the door behind him.

"That stupid, stuck up-" Anise stuck her tongue out at the closed door. "So what do you wanna do Tear? You're welcome to come sleep in the other room with us."

"I think I'll be okay," Tear replied, unable to hold back the blush she knew must be on her face. "We'll never hear the end of it from Jade otherwise."

"That's true. Well as long as you don't mind, it's okay I guess. Good night Tear."

"Yes, sleep well," Ion added as Anise dragged him into the other room.

"Good night you two," Tear said softly as she entered her appointed room, leaving Guy alone in the hall.

"Hey… What about me?"
Asch quietly opened the door and slipped out, carefully closing it behind him. It had been his luck that the old man had ended up sleeping in the other room; it would make this a whole lot easier. He had something important he wanted to tend to, something he knew no one else would understand, and that he didn't have the time or the patience to explain. Careful not to wake any of the other guests, he silently snuck downstairs, and slipped outside into the night.

Luke rolled over in his bed. Where the hell was Asch going at this time of night anyways? Luke pulled the blankets up over his head. What was so important that he couldn't wait until morning? Whatever. Luke buried his head further into his pillow. Normally, he'd get up and follow. It was habit... his responsibility, if only just to make sure Asch was safe.

*Don't give me crap about responsibilities when you don't even have a future!*

But for the first time in his life, Luke just couldn't be bothered. So he rolled over in his bed, and went back to sleep.

"I'm sorry to say but, we only managed to recover a small amount of data," Astor announced once everyone was settled. Asch was still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. Whatever he had snuck off to do must have kept him out for quite awhile. Luke knew it took a lot of sleep deprivation for his wayward original to start showing it. Oh well, serves him right for sneaking out to Score knows where all night.

"What was the problem?" Guy asked.

"Well, it seems the fon disk was handled a bit roughly and it's more damaged than we thought. We succeeded in gathering small amounts of information here and there, but it's scattered, and almost impossible to make sense of."

Luke had to be careful not to be too overt with his signs of relief. He realized he should have felt bad, Guy was so disappointed, but that was the last thing he wanted anyone to be finding out about him.

"Here," Astor handed Guy a small bunch of papers. "This is what we managed to recover."

"Thanks," Guy accepted them along with the fon disk. "Not to be rude or anything, but we'd probably better get going if we're going to catch the ferry."

"Guy's right," Ion agreed. "Thank you very much for all your hard work."

"It was my pleasure Fon Master. We shall have to arrange a longer stay for you next time."

"Yes, we shall, sometime soon."

"I'll look forward to the next time you're in the neighbourhood. Feel free to stop by! And that goes for all of you, not just the Fon Master."

"Oh boy!" Anise piped up!

"She'll be moving in next week," Luke offered sarcastically.

"Quiet you." Anise playfully glared at Luke who returned the gesture by sticking his tongue out.

"Alright, alright, enough, let's just go," Asch said suppressing another yawn.
"Looks like someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed," Luke muttered under his breath.

"Says the one we had to send Guy to drag out of bed this morning," Asch shot back.

"Yes because you would know, considering all that quality time you and Guy spend together."

"Enough you two!" Tear snapped, cutting of the impending argument. "You want to fight fine, but this isn't the time or the place for it. Save it for the ship where the rest of us don't have to listen to you!" The whole room fell silent.

"Yes ma'am."

Chesedonia wasn't quite as busy early in the morning as it had been at midday the day before, but most of the peddlers had already lined the streets, laying out their wares for the people that the afternoon would undoubtedly bring. There really wasn't any excuse as to why they hadn't seen it coming.

Sync flew through the streets, nothing but a sudden breeze to those he passed, completely invisible until he slowed for his attack on the group. Fools, they should know better than to let their guard down like that. Oh well, far be it from him to pass up such an inviting opportunity. The one he was after, the blond, also held the prize he sought. How utterly convenient. This was just too easy! He reached out, and struck.

Guy reacted at the last second, turning away from his attacker. He hadn't been quick enough to evade the attack entirely, but with his reflexes, he had been able to move in such a way that the attack only grazed his arm. Unfortunately for Guy, it hadn't been a normal attack.

Although Sync's hand had only grazed the side of his arm, the strike caused Guy to cry out. A burning pain flew up his arm, like a hot knife carving the glyph into his skin, dropping him to his knees.

Sync spun around, upset at having missed his second target: the papers in the blond's other hand. "Hand those over!"

"We can't fight here," Jade proclaimed, "Hurry, to the ship!"

"Guy!" Luke ran to his best friend's side. "Are you okay to go?"


"Not so fast!" Sync struck again, but this time they managed to sidestep his strike.

"Come on Luke, let's go."

"Yeah," Luke and Guy hurried after everyone else towards the Kimlasca port while Sync was still recovering from his failed attempt.

"Hmph." Sync stood up, brushing the dust from his uniform and carefully adjusting his mask. Several of the citizens had stopped to watch the commotion, but they eventually lost interest in the green-haired boy, and returned to their business.

Sync stood there awhile longer, until he could see the ferry departing in the distance. Any further pursuit of them would be futile. He twirled the fon disk he had made them drop around his finger. It was pretty damaged; he doubted they got any pertinent information from it. That was just as
well. It saved him the time and effort of collecting the papers that the group had managed to hang onto.

As for his other objective, everything had gone just as planned. He had his curse slot laid, his extra leverage ready for the next time they should meet. With the one they called 'Guy' as his puppet; he could only hope that that time would be soon.
Baticul finally appeared on the horizon late in the morning of the following day. The clouds that had plagued the morning sky were now dispersing and the afternoon held the promise of sunshine. Luke quietly watched the city slowly growing in size as they approached his hometown.

It would be nice to finally be home. He could finally relax in his own bed and eat some of the chef's awesome cooking. Luke couldn't even begin to describe how nice it would be to lounge around without worrying that he'd be attacked by a group of bandits or a rather sadistic colonel. Yet somehow... mixed in with all the excitement and relief that his grand adventure was coming to a close, Luke found another feeling he never thought he would feel with his home finally in sight.

Dread. Luke was dreading returning home. Part of him didn't want to go back to his tedious day to day life, where nothing interesting or fun ever happened, and where he was tied down, never allowed to leave the city. He knew after a few days, Ion and the others would all leave; they had their own lives to go back to after all, and he would be alone. Sure he still had Asch and Guy, but it wasn't the same. He was grateful to have them both around, but he still cherished his new friends, and not being able to go visit them or talk to them again, wasn't something Luke wasn't ready to deal with.

No matter how much as he wished it would just go away for awhile, the towering city of Baticul continued to get closer until the massive ferry lurched to a stop alongside one of Baticul's many piers. There were few people aboard that had made the journey from Chesedonia to Baticul, so the port was somewhat spared the crowds that usually entailed a ship's arrival. The passengers that had disembarked, quickly caught an air car to wherever they were going, leaving Luke and his friends more or less alone on the docks, save for a few citizens who often loitered around this part of the city.

Luke looked around; everything was as he remembered it. The murky water, the cobblestone streets, the towering buildings; nothing had changed. He already missed the pristine waters of Tataroo Valley and the colourful vegetation of St. Binah, but all that was a part of the past now. Brushing aside the disappointment that realization brought with it, Luke set his mind on the task at hand. He couldn't let himself sulk just yet; he still had the hardest part of their journey to complete. Seeing two familiar figures approaching in the distance, Luke realized that task was about to get a whole lot harder.

"Commander Goldberg, General Cecille," the young noble greeted them both. Though he managed to remember their names from their occasional visits to the manor to see Father, he wasn't able to entirely hide the surprise in his voice. He may not know much about how everything worked at the castle, but he knew enough to know it was no small affair that had such high ranking people doing the guards' job. "What are you guys doing here?"

"Luke! It's good to see you've returned home safely. I hope you'll excuse my rudeness, but we've urgent business to attend to." Goldberg replied, brushing past the young noble.

"My apologies," Cecille bowed her head as they walked by.

"There he is. I've found the spy!" Goldberg called to the female commander, wasting no time singling Jade out. "You are clearly of the Malkuth military, identify yourself at once!"

Jade shrugged, a disappointed sigh escaping his lips. It wasn't as if he hadn't expected difficulty, but surely they could have gone unnoticed longer than that... "Colonel Jade Curtiss," he finally
provided. "Third Division Malkuth Imperial Forces."

"The Jade Curtiss?" Cecille exclaimed. "Why would Malkuth send such a renowned soldier as a spy?"

"I'm not certain. He is the emperor's personal confidant." Goldberg answered. "Regardless, he's clearly the one we're looking for. Restrain him at once!"

"Enough!" Asch's voice caused both Kimlascan commanders to halt, turning around to find its source. "Stand down. I'll vouch that he is not a spy and of no threat to Kimlasca. On whose orders was it to arrest him?"

"It was Grand Maestro Mohs that brought news of a spy being sent from Malkuth. Several units were dispatched to monitor the entrances shortly afterwards." Cecille provided.

"Grand Maestro Mohs was it?" Asch thought on it for a moment. "Commander Goldberg, please return to the castle and arrange a formal meeting with his Majesty at once. Tell him I said it's urgent. Brigadier General Cecille, could I ask you to return to our manor and let our parents know we've returned?"

"Certainly." The Brigadier General smiled and bowed her head.

"Why thank you for keeping me out of their custody," Jade said mockingly.

"Easier to get you out of their custody than out of the dungeon," Asch shot back. "Besides someone as old and frail as you would probably catch pneumonia." Jade let out an indignant cough.

"That's some authority you have for the son of a Duke," he commented, surprised to see the pair not only do exactly as he had asked, but to do so without any form of protest. Interesting. Luke shuffled uncomfortably next to him. Very interesting.

"Well that's what you get when you're the heir to the throne." Luke spat bitterly.

"Whoa. Whoa. Hold a second. You're a prince?" Anise shouted, drawing the attention of the few people still hanging around the port.

"No, not technically," Asch muttered, somewhat disgruntled at the sudden attention.

"He's engaged to Princess Natalia," Guy provided.

"What?" Anise voice struck a pitch higher than Mieu was capable of. "You mean you're engaged? No way! Luke! Why didn't you tell me he was already getting hitched?"

Luke snickered, "Because it was way too much fun to watch."

"Damn! I have no luck at all! I picked the wrong one."

"What was that Anise?" Ion inquired curiously.

"Oh nothing!" She chirped cheerfully. "Nothing at all! Isn't the king waiting for us? We'd better not keep him waiting!" Anise skipped off towards one of the air cars. "Come on guys! We're going to be late!"

"There's not that much of a hurry," Asch told her as she made her way back to the group. "It'll take Goldberg some time to arrange the audience. We have some time to kill."
"We still don't want to be late though." Luke commented to Guy, casually resting his arms behind his head.

"Yeah, it looks like we're already in his Majesty's bad books," the blond agreed.

"What concerns me is Grand Maestro Mohs' interference," Jade commented. "It's looking more and more like he's looking to start a war."

"There must be some kind of mistake. Grand Maestro Mohs would never want a war!" Tear interjected.

"We can't say for certain, but even you must agree that he is the most suspicious of the potential suspects," Jade pointed out.

"Yeah," Anise piped up, "and he also has the authority to command the God-Generals."

"Ahhh, I see now." At that statement, Jade suddenly came to a realization. So many more pieces fell into place now that he knew the full extent of Asch's identity.

"See what Colonel?"

"That's how you knew you would be a target at Choral Castle wasn't it? As the heir to the throne, kidnapping you would be a logical move if they were attempting to start a war. In fact, I'd almost go as far as to say, it would be more effective than kidnapping Ion." Jade elaborated, his scrutinizing gaze never leaving the future king in question.

"Wait a sec!" Anise too came to a realization, "if you've got that much say in things, then we really wouldn't have needed Ion as a mediator. Why'd you go so out of your way to help us rescue him?"

Asch stole a glance at Luke but didn't answer the question. "We should get going. It'll still be some time before we need to be at the castle, but we'd best head off now in case we run into any interruptions along the way."

"Certainly, Your Majesty." Jade said mockingly with an exaggerated bow.

Asch scowled. "Watch it, or I'll stick you in that dungeon myself old man," he said menacingly before turning and heading for the air cars.

"They'll be plenty of opportunity for prodding later," Jade muttered contentedly, following in Asch's suit.

"Shall we be off then?" Guy asked Luke.

"Sure. Let's go. Coming Ion?"

"Yes. Let's go stop this war."

"Wow!" Anise ran out into the plaza gazing up at the towering heights of Baticul. She had never seen the capital of Kimlasca before. It went up forever. She wondered how on all Auldrant they got building materials up to the very top! She bet that's where all the rich people lived, and what an awesome view they must have!

Tear too was taking her time to check out the sights. The last time she had been here, she had been so focused on finding and killing Van that she hadn't taken the time to enjoy what Baticul had to offer. She looked over at Luke, he certainly seemed happy to be home. Maybe now that they were
home, he and Asch could finally make up.

Admittedly, they hadn't actually argued since they had left Chesedonia. However, now they simply went on as if the other wasn't even there. Tear almost preferred it when they were arguing; at least when they were yelling at each other, they were still acknowledging the other's existence. Guy seemed to be surprisingly okay with it when she she had taken the opportunity to ask about it on the way here. Perhaps she was just making a big deal out of things, it was probably normal for them to fight like this. She wouldn't know, after all, Van hadn't really been around enough when she was young for them to ever get into any huge disagreements. In fact the only disagreement they'd ever had, had been the one that resulted in her trying to kill him in the Fabre Manor a few weeks ago. So putting it in perspective, Luke and Asch really weren't doing all that bad.

Guy watched Tear stifle a smile and wondered where her train of thought had taken her. He walked up the stairs beside Luke, Asch, Jade and Tear in front of them, Ion and Anise bringing up the rear. Anise behind him, now that didn't make him feel especially safe. He still felt kind of bad about what had happened on the boat ride to Chesedonia. He didn't mean to hurt her, but he just couldn't help it.

"Hey Guy?"


"I'm sorry about what Asch said to you yesterday."

"What's with you all of a sudden? What he says isn't your fault."

"Hm." Luke stared out at the endless sea. He really was upset. "Do you mind if I ask you something?" Luke finally spoke up.

"What is it?"

"Why are you afraid of women?"

Guy scratched the back of his head. "That's a good question. To be honest, I really don't know."

"If you don't know, how come it's so scary for you then?"

Guy let out a sigh. He really hadn't planned to tell anyone, much less Luke. "When I was young, my entire family died. I don't remember the details of what happened. But I think that something that happened then is the cause."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be, it was a long time ago now."


"Oh come on Luke, don't be so bitter, it's your first time on a boat after all." Guy grinned and patted him on the back.

"Have you been telling that to everyone?"

"Well...not everyone." Guy laughed.

"Now why do I not believe you?" Luke eyed him suspiciously. "Because you're about the only one
who knows and who would be in the position to tell everyone else."

"Has Jade been bugging you about it?"

"No… why did you tell him?"

"No… but maybe you'd best avoid him for awhile..." Guy backed off nervously.

"Hey get back here!" Luke chased after him but slipped on the wet deck.

"Luke!" Guy motioned to help Luke to his feet, but the gesture was refused. For a moment Guy wondered if Luke was angry with him, but those fears were dispelled when Luke threw his head back and did something Guy had been trying to coerce him into all day. He laughed.

A flash of pink hair snapped Guy back to the present. Was that-?

"Oh hello Luke!" A local woman came up to them.

"Gyah!" Guy dove behind said redhead.

"Hello Guy," the lady chuckled, "Still as frightful as ever I see."

"Y-yeah."

"I'm glad to see you've returned safely. It's nice to see they finally let you out of the city. Did you enjoy your trip?"

Luke thought on it for a moment. "Yeah… I did."

"Well I best be on my way, it was nice seeing you again." The lady was gone just as suddenly as she came.

"Hey Luke?" Anise inquired curiously, "What did she mean by 'finally being allowed out of the city'? Have you never been out of the city before?"

"No, I was always forbidden from ever leaving Baticul." Luke replied.

"That's a shame," Ion spoke up. "There are all kinds of wonderful things to see in the world. May I ask why?"

"It has to do with something that happened when I was little," Luke answered, but didn't offer any details.

"We should be going." Asch insisted, continuing on towards the lift.

"Now who's rushing?" Anise muttered.

"He's right, we should go," Guy agreed. "The longer we linger around, the longer whoever wants this war to happen has of stopping us." He took another look around; there was no sign of Noir or either of her cronies. Maybe it was just his imagination after all.

Anise had been right about Baticul's highest levels, the view was stunning. Tear took a look around. It was nothing like the rest of the city. While most of Baticul was neat and well kept, it seemed to lack any kind of colour. At Baticul's peak, the Castle stood before a gorgeous courtyard. Flowing
water, and flowers and trees gave it a life that the rest of the city lacked. Beside the castle stood a
large pristine white manor, equally immersed in gardens surrounded by a large, well kept yard.

"Is that where you live?" Ion asked Luke as they walked by.

"Yeah, that's our manor," Luke answered, waving cheerfully to the guard at the entrance. The guard
casually waved back, but snapped to attention when Asch looked his way.

"You know, you don't have to come to the castle," Asch said, speaking to Luke for the first time
since Chesedonia. Tear noticed that the underlying anger and resentment in his voice seemed to
have faded. Maybe there was hope for the two of them yet. "I can take care of things if you just
want to head home."

Luke however, didn't seem so calm about it. At Asch's words, she could see the fury build up
inside of him. "I'm not going home! I promised Ion that I would help him stop this war just like you
did! I put my fair share of work into this journey too, you know!"

"Fine, do whatever you want." Asch backed off, clearly not in the mood to fight.

"We have an audience with His Majesty," Asch told the guard on duty at the door once they
reached the castle.

"Yes, we have been informed by Commander Goldberg of your arrival," the guard replied. "Is there
someone named Tear among you?"

"Yes. That's me." Tear stepped up.

"Grand Maestro Mohs requested you report to him as soon as possible."

"Was the Grand Maestro here recently?" Asch inquired.

"Yes, he left just moments ago. I believe His Majesty cut the Grand Maestro's audience short when
he received your message. The Grand Maestro was in a rather foul mood," the guard grumbled,
obviously having been the unfortunate target of said foul mood.

"Thank you for the message. I shall report to him as soon as I'm finished with my responsibilities
here." Tear gave the guard a small bow as she followed everyone into the castle, up the grand
stairway, and through the two massive doors that stood between them and their final destination.

The throne room was quite unlike anything Tear had seen before. The vaulted ceiling went up
almost two stories and several large windows let the afternoon sun light steam in on all those who
stood below. At the end of a long red carpet, stood three thrones sitting just slightly higher than the
rest of the room, putting the two figures that sat there above their audience. In the middle one sat
the king, His Majesty King Ingobert the sixth, and on his right sat a girl who must have been the
princess. She sat with all the dignity that would befit one of her station, her green eyes eagerly
fixed on the visitors entering through the doors. The third throne to the left was empty.

As soon as they had all entered the room, the young princess' face lit up. Her golden hair and blue
dress were still flowing out behind her as she landed in Asch's arms. She held him, almost sobbing
and it took a moment for the surprised young noble to return the gesture.

"Why?" Natalia's voice was muffled as she buried her face into Asch's shoulder. No one needed to
see her face to tell that she was bordering on tears. "I was so worried! Why did you run off like that
without saying anything?"
Asch held her closer. "I'm sorry," he whispered into her ear. "There was something I had to do."

"I know, but I thought I'd lost you again. Please don't make me worry like that." Natalia stayed in his comforting embrace for a little while longer but eventually she detached herself from Asch and looked him in the eyes. "You still could have stopped by to see me before you left!" she scolded.

"Sorry Natalia, but it was important."

"Well, what's past is past. There is little point in fighting about it now."

"Not to interrupt such an important reunion," Jade cut in, "but we do have some more formal business to attend to."

"Yes," Ingobert commented from the throne, "let us get on with business, and you two can catch up once we're done."

"Uncle, this is Ion, Fon Master of the Order of Lorelei and Jade Curtiss of the Malkuth Empire. They wish to speak with you on behalf of Emperor Peony," Luke said as he stepped forward.

"Ah Luke, it's good to see you've returned home safely as well." Ingobert smiled at his nephew. "Thank you for the introduction, now of what matters did Peony wish to discuss?"

"Thank you," Ion bowed, "It's an honour to see you again Your Majesty. I come before you today accompanied by Colonel Jade Curtiss who is here on behalf of Emperor Peony the Ninth. I implore you to heard him out and consider his words."

"Indeed, I shall hear what he has to say," Ingobert agreed.

"I am honoured to be in your presence." Jade kneeled before King Ingobert, holding out a large white envelope, emblazoned with Malkuth's seal and gold lettering across the front. "I bear an imperial letter from my lord for His Glorious Majesty, King Ingobert the Sixth."

Luke had to cover his mouth with his hand to keep from laughing outright at the sight of Jade being so humble. Despite the words out of his mouth, it still didn't seem all that sincere, as if Jade truly were the one with more authority. Not all that surprising, it was Jade after all.

"Uncle, I don't know what Mohs was telling you, but there can't be a war!" Luke burst out.

"Relax Luke, the letter from Malkuth arrived, and I won't ignore it. However, there are a few things I'd like to know. Asch, could I ask you to spend the night at the castle? It'll be a good experience for you, and you might be able to help me since you travelled through Malkuth."

"Certainly," Asch replied, with Natalia still happily attached to his arm.

"Well then, I'll have rooms prepared for our guests. It may be some time before they're ready." Ingobert trailed off.

"That's alright," Ion spoke up, "Actually, if it's okay with you Luke, I wouldn't mind seeing your manor. You've told me so much about it."


"Then I'll see that the rooms are prepared upon your return," Ingobert replied, leaving everyone but Asch and Natalia to make their way towards the door.

"Luke." Asch tried to catch his sibling's attention, but Luke continued to walk towards Asch as if
he hadn't said a thing.

"Luke," Asch said louder, grabbing his arm as he walked by. Luke gave him an angry look for a split second before ripping his arm out of Asch's grasp and disappearing down the stairs. Everyone watched the scenario play out, but with little to say of add, they silently followed Luke's stead, leaving a very hurt Asch to stare at the empty doorway through which his little brother had just abandoned him.

"You manor looks quite impressive," Ion commented as they entered the outer gates.


"Well, this is where we part company," Jade spoke up.

"What? Jade doesn't want the grand tour?" Luke asked sarcastically.

"Tsk. Tsk. Keep that attitude up and you'll end up just like Asch." Luke scowled. "I'll pass, I've a few things in the city I wouldn't mind looking into, but perhaps that should wait until the morning. I highly doubt we'll have such a quick reply and someone as old as I can't handle long days like this."

"Old...uh huh...sure," Luke mumbled, watching Jade headed back to the castle. "Wonder what he's really up to."

"You'll find out someday, that it's just safer not to know," Anise commented.

"Wow! So this is Master's home?" Mieu bounced up to the door. "Can we go inside? Can we please?"

"Yes, so stop begging already," Luke replied, cringing as the little creature's excitement cranked its voice up an octave.

Luke opened the doors and everyone walked into the entrance hall. Through the windows, they could see the courtyard, bathed in the golden light of the setting sun.

"Ah! Master Luke." One of the guards greeted him. "It's good to see you return. With the Lady being ill and all-"

"Wait," Luke cut him off, "Mother's sick?"

"She fell ill not long after you vanished."

"Can we go see her first?" Luke asked, turning around to face everyone.

"Of course," Ion replied, "I wouldn't dream of keeping you from going to see your sick mother."

"Yes, that would be for the best," Tear also answered. "But, don't you think we should go get Asch?"

Luke thought on it for a moment, his face growing sad. "No," He finally said with a small sigh, "Asch will be really busy at the castle right now. He has a lot of responsibilities and things to attend to, especially with the letter from Malkuth and peace negotiations. He doesn't need anything else to worry about right now."

Tear watched Luke, the look on his face speaking the volumes that he wouldn't. He didn't hate
Asch. There was no anger or resentment or bitterness anymore. Just a sad acceptance of a truth that hurt. No matter what he did, Asch would always have more authority, more power to help his friends than Luke would. Luke knew and understood this. He understood the extent of Asch's responsibilities, and she suspected he sometimes wished he could be a part of it... but he couldn't, and that hurt him more than anything else.

"Let's go see your mother," she offered with a gentle smile, taking Luke's hand.

"Yeah, let's go."

"Luke!" Susanne sat up in bed when she saw her son enter. "You're home! Are you alright? Were you hurt? Did anyone-"

"I'm fine Mother." Luke smiled, cutting off her worried tirade of questions.

"And-"

"Asch is fine too. He just has business he has to attend to at the castle tonight," Luke said softly as he sat on the bed at her side. She leaned over and gave him a hug.

"I'm so glad you've both come home safely."

"Ma'am," Tear drew Susanne's attention, "I'm terribly sorry for involving your sons in all this." She said with a deep bow.

"You're Van's little sister? Tear?"

"Yes. I apologize for my actions; I attempted to strike down my brother without giving thought to where I was or who else might get involved. I'm truly sorry."

"Thank you for your apologies... but Tear, please don't strike at your own brother. I couldn't imagine if my boys-" Susanne couldn't bring herself to finish her line, but the meaning was clear. Luke put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Thank you for your kind words," Tear replied, unable to look Susanne in the eye.

"So Luke, who are these other people, I don't believe we've been introduced."

"Oh!" Luke stood up, "these are my other friends. This is Ion, Fon Master of the Order of Lorelei, and this is his Guardian Anise. I was just going to show them around the manor."

"What about me?" Mieu hopped onto the bed beside Susanne.

"And this is Mieu. He's a cheagle from the woods north of Engeve."

"It's a pleasure to meet you!" Mieu squeaked.

"Well, don't let me keep you," Susanne told them. "You go show them around and have a good time."

"I think I'll stay here and keep Master's mother company!" Mieu said curling up on one of the soft pillows.

"That would be lovely," Susanne replied, watching the young cheagle start to fall asleep. "You go enjoy yourselves now. Don't worry about us, I think we could both use some sleep."
"Thanks Mother."

"It was a pleasure to meet you." Ion said with a bow.

"The pleasure was all mine Fon Master," Susanne stated. "I do hope you enjoy your stay here."

"I'm quite certain I will," he replied with a smile, and with that gesture they all left the Lady of the house to rest.

"Wow Luke! Your house is huge!" Anise's voice almost echoed in the entrance hall. A couple hours, a good solid meal, and much laughter later, they had finished the tour of the house. The last light of day was fading, and night slowly blanketed the city.

"Yes, it certainly is a lovely house. You must have enjoyed growing up here," Ion commented.

"Oh it has its ups and downs," Guy commented.

"That's right; you've worked here for quite awhile haven't you?"

"Yeah, since I was pretty young. Can't say I can complain too much. Except maybe being worked to death by a couple of fussy redheads."


"If you don't mind my saying so Luke, your room seemed rather small compared to the others," Ion offered hesitantly.

"Yeah, well…"

"There's a story behind that," Guy spoke up.

"Ooo, let's hear it!" Anise got excited.

"It's not that exciting" Luke grumbled. He wasn't especially fond of listening to others tell stories of the crazy things he'd done as a child.

"He's right," Guy chuckled, "it's not that exciting. Luke actually used to have a much bigger room on the other side of the manor. That was when he was still pretty young. We'd keep waking up and finding him in Asch's room. He'd sneak in there every time he was scared or he had a bad dream or anything. Eventually it was becoming an issue. We didn't want someone so young trekking across the manor in the middle of the night, so we moved him into that room which was right above Asch's. And well, he's just never moved out of it."

"It was Mother's idea." Luke said, suddenly very interested in the decorative cannon at the other end of the room.

"Do you think she'll be alright?" Tear asked softly.

"I wouldn't worry," Guy told her. "Now that Luke and Asch are home, I'm sure she'll be just fine. She's always been a bit weak, so I'd be willing to bet that it was Luke's disappearing and Asch taking off all of a sudden that made her ill."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, I'm sure of one thing," Anise interrupted, "We need to be getting back to the castle. It's
getting pretty late.

"Yes, thank you very much for the tour Luke." Ion smiled, "Perhaps we'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I'll stop in sometime for sure."

"I should be off too," Tear agreed. "I still have to report to the Grand Maestro."

"Alright, have a good night you guys. I'll see you all tomorrow!" Luke called as the door closed behind the three of them.

"Speaking of reporting, I should probably go report to the White Knights. They weren't too thrilled the search for you and Asch was left to a 'lowly servant' like me."

"Going to kiss up?"

"More than likely," Guy responded with a chuckle. "You heading off to bed?"

"Yeah, it's been a long day."

"I'll see you in the morning then," Guy said before he disappeared behind the door that lead to the servant's quarters.

It had been a long day. Luke opened the doors and walked out into the courtyard, the crisp night air making him shiver. Across the courtyard, he could see the light in his parent's room still on. He was glad his mother had seemed like she would be okay. The times when she fell ill used to scare him to tears when he was still young. Even now, he hated to see her like that. Someone so strong of heart didn't deserve to be that weak.

He wondered if he should have gone to get Asch after all. Seeing him certainly would have given her a good boost... but Asch was undoubtedly busy up at the castle. Asch had responsibilities. He was going somewhere in life. Asch had a future. Luke... didn't.

Luke let out a sigh as he stared at the empty courtyard. This was where it had all begun, and now, where it was all ending. Fitting as it was, he still wished it wasn't ending... and, it wasn't how he wanted it to end either. Not like this. Not with things between him and Asch as they were. This wasn't how he wanted to come home.

He looked up at the stars, and a sudden sharp pain crashed down on him. A very familiar, head-splitting pain; one that he would have been very happy to never have to feel again. In fact, he wasn't even supposed to be feeling it. Wasn't that whole mess at Choral Castle supposed to fix it? Luke held his head, knowing from seven years of experience what came next.

But when the voice came, it wasn't the deep resonating voice he had come to expect every time his head hurt. It was a different voice, a much more familiar voice. One that he'd recognize in an instant because, after all, he'd heard it almost every day in his seven years of life.

'Luke, we need to talk.'
'Wait for me there.'

Asch quietly opened the castle door, slipped out the crack and silently closed it again. He had no idea why he was sneaking around, it's not like he wasn't allowed to go home for a bit, but this was important, and he didn't want anyone, namely Natalia, following him. No offence to his fiancée, he loved her like no other, but her relationship with Luke was tantamount to his relationship with Guy, and that was to say that they weren't exactly on the best of terms.

The manor was as quiet as the castle had been, everyone but the guards settling in for the night. Asch stopped when he reached the doors leading to the courtyard. Luke's angry stare from earlier that day flashed through his mind. He hadn't wanted to resort to using the fon slots they'd just recently opened, but he hadn't seen any other option. Luke obviously had no intention of talking to him, and that wasn't from lack of trying.

Even Asch was still uncertain of the extent to which their newly synched fon slots connected them. In fact, he hadn't even been entirely sure Luke could hear his voice across them. He had just wanted Luke to talk to him and then he’d just... reacted. Asch originally had every intention of discussing the matter with Luke, but their untimely argument had gotten in the way of that plan, now everything was a mess.

Asch took his hand off the door handle. Talking to Luke through that connection…that was a big jump. Would Luke be mad at him, angry that Asch had kept that fact from him? It was a sore subject to begin with, and Asch wasn't sure what to make of it all. He had gotten used to the vague sense of emotion he could sense from his sibling. In fact, he suspected that had been what had further fuelled their dispute, on top of their own anger, they were both feeling the other's as well. Not that they weren't already somewhat used to it. Admittedly he'd always felt he had some idea of how Luke was feeling, and Luke certainly seemed like he shared the same ability, but it had become a lot stronger since Choral Castle.

Still... Asch understood all this, and had been somewhat prepared for it from the very beginning, Luke didn't. Luke hadn't spent the time researching fomicry like he had, though in his defense Luke had been busy with learning how to read at the time. Would Luke even still be there? Asch genuinely hoped so. He also hoped he hadn't just relit a smothering fire with his reckless and desperate attempt to get Luke to talk to him. This had gone on far too long, and it was time to suck it up and apologize. He was willing to take a hit to his pride this time around; he figured he’d earned it. Now if only Luke would listen, if only he would still be there.

There weren't many things that Asch was afraid of, and even fewer that he'd be willing to admit to, but his hand frozen on the door knob betrayed his hesitation. What was he afraid of? Of being abandoned, of being alone? Or was it simply a matter of delaying the inevitable realization that the only person who ever understood him, was beyond his reach for good? That pointless fear had never served to do anything but chain him down. Asch took a deep breath and opened the door.

The cool night air rushed in, gently sweeping his long crimson hair out behind him. The courtyard was dimly lit by the light of the moon now that few indoor lights were left on to spill out the windows and illuminate the area. Across the yard, sitting at the foot of one of the many statues, was Luke.

Luke watched his older brother as he made his way across the courtyard. He stood up and met him halfway. The two of them stood in silence for a few moments, looking in each others eyes, trying to
gauge the other's mood. Asch opened his mouth, but realized he didn't even know where to start.

"How about you start by explaining what you did." Luke offered, subconsciously bringing a comforting hand to his head that still seemed to echo with the pain that had consumed it moments earlier.

"I'm actually not to sure how it all works myself," Asch admitted. "It has to do with our fon slots being synched, but even I don't really understand the details. I wanted to talk to you, and you wouldn't listen to me so…” he trailed off.

"Yeah well, could you not make a habit of it? That hurt!" Luke rubbed his head, one eye open and on his sibling. Asch looked at him somewhat surprised, he wasn't... mad? "So what was it you wanted to talk about?" Luke finally asked. Asch took a deep breath.

"Look, about what I said on the boat...about you not having a future...I'm sorry."

"Why?" Luke asked softly, his gaze meeting the ground. "It's true. It's not like I'm going anywhere in life like you are."

"Hey," Asch placed his hand on his brother's chin and forced Luke to look him in the eye, "I don't want you to believe that. Just because you haven't decided what you want to do with your life, does not mean you don't have a future."

'Okay?' Asch's last reassurance resonated in Luke's mind and brought with it a warm feeling. But this time, it didn't hurt.

"How did you do that?" Luke asked.

"Do what?"

"I heard your voice in my head again, but it didn't hurt this time."

"It didn't? That's weird, I didn't do anything differently. I wonder though, maybe it has to do with the fact that you were listening?"

"Listening?"

"Well, back at the castle, trying to talk to you was like having to yell across a field, I was fighting to be heard. But this time, it wasn't anything like that. You weren't fighting me off."

"I wonder... could I talk to you the same way?"

"Probably, I'll have to show you how sometime."

"Good, that should keep Jade off our tails." Asch broke out laughing and Luke quickly followed suit. They had forgotten how much they truly enjoyed the other's company.

"So what else did you not tell me about that big mess at Choral Castle?" Luke asked tauntingly, a grin still spread across his face.

"I'm sorry; I meant to talk to you more about it on the boat but-"

"Yeah, I pretty much figured. Tell me one thing though: why did you really want to sync our fon slots? It obviously wasn't to fix our headaches."

"What do you mean by that?" Asch inquired curiously.
"Oh don't play stupid, I'm talking about on the boat to Chesedonia."


"You mean you didn't feel anything?" Luke questioned curiously.

"No, what happened?"

Luke fell silent, still somewhat ashamed at his failure, and how close he had come to doing something terrible.

"What was it? What happened?" Asch questioned, Luke's hesitation giving his voice an edge of panic.

"It's that whole stupid fon slot thing," Luke finally offered. "I was so mad, I decided to try practicing my hyperresonance to try and calm down. Then all of a sudden I got this huge headache and almost lost control of it."

"That's really weird, I didn't feel a thing." Asch pondered on the matter for a moment. "Maybe it had to do with the fact that you were practicing your hyperresonance? The seventh fonon is the fonon of sound; it wouldn't be surprising if it had a role in inducing those headaches."

"So you don't think it has to do with our fon slots?"

"No. The only thing that you almost losing control of your hyperresonance means, is that you need more practice." Asch said jokingly ruffling Luke's hair. "Unless you think it's something else, did anything else happen?"

"Hey!" Luke protested as he tried to fix the mess Asch had just made of his hair. "No, I don't think so," he answered Asch's question somewhat hesitantly.

"Okay then. Well, I'd better head back. Natalia's gonna rake me over, I left without saying anything again."

"Man has she got you on a short leash."

"Hey I'm here aren't I? Besides, a little common courtesy never hurt anyone."

"Sure, sure, you keep telling yourself that."

"You'll understand someday," Asch said with a chuckle.

"No you hope I'll understand someday, because then I won't be able to tease you about it anymore."

Asch laughed. "True enough," he said, turning to leave.

"Hey Asch!" Asch turned around. "Thanks for making a special trip from the castle just for me," Luke teased. Then his face took on a more serious look, "I'm sorry too. For what I said, and how I acted." Asch smiled and Luke smiled in return.

"Good night Luke."

"Same goes to you."

Luke stretched, and let his gaze wander the courtyard once the doors had closed behind his sibling.
The lights in the manor were almost all out. Only a couple faint lights, by which the night guards worked, and the light in the drawing room were still on. He wondered who was still up, it was getting pretty late, but he had to head that way to reach his room anyways.

Luke just couldn't erase the smile off his face. He hadn't realized just how much he had missed his one on one chats with Asch. The latest revelations about the connection between the two of them piqued his interest, despite being somewhat upset about not having been trusted with that information before now. He just didn't have it in him to be upset about it, and he really didn't have any reason to be, it had been late, then everything had just snowballed the next day, and after that they hadn't been talking. But being in the dark about something that so closely involved himself, still left a bad taste in his mouth.

"...but this is different." The muffled voices could be heard through the door to the drawing room, catching the young noble's attention as he wandered by. "This is beyond just dangerous. Whoever goes will not return." What the... Luke backed up several paces, pressing his ear against the door. Though both tones were familiar, he could only identify the voice of his father, not that of the person he was speaking with.

"I know it's not easy, but one of them has to go. We've really no choice in the matter."

"I knew this day would come, but I still do not wish to send my son to his death." Luke froze. He shouldn't be hearing this, but he just couldn't bring himself to move. They were talking about him and Asch! One of them was going somewhere? And not going to come back? There had to be some mistake!

"Which will you send then? It is clear which one the Score dictates. Asch must go."

"But Asch is the heir to Kimlasca's throne. His role is undeniably vital. Losing him, would be a heavy blow indeed."

"Then what of Luke?"

"Luke is still young. Whether or not he is capable of such a feat... I do not know. Asch is certainly the most capable of handling the task. If it weren't for the consequences, he would be the obvious choice."

"You don't wish to send Asch because he is the most needed, but you don't wish to send Luke because he isn't capable of handling the task. Ultimately we've no choice, we must fulfill the Score."

"It demands Asch, but Luke is also the light of the sacred flame. Perhaps it matters not really, if one must be sacrificed, it should be the one whose loss will impact Kimlasca the least..."

Luke couldn't handle it anymore. Was he not worth anything to anyone? Bolting from the drawing room, Luke didn't stop until he had reached his bedroom and had the door closed behind him. He grabbed one of the pillows on his bed and chucked it at the wall where it crashed into his shelf sending a dozen books crashing to the ground.

Luke flung himself down on his bed, almost in tears bred by a range of emotions from anger to despair. It all boiled down to one thing: Asch was more important than he was. He was useless, incompetent and didn't have a place in the world. Asch would always be the more valuable one and nothing he could do would ever change that in anyone's eyes.

_Prove that you're just as important as Asch. Then you can earn their respect. You can gain the_
Master Van's words echoed in Luke's mind. He hadn't told Asch anything about Master Van or their conversation. He could feel the resentment crawl up at the thought of his sibling. No, he wouldn't let himself feel like that. It wasn't Asch's fault. Asch understood, and Asch acknowledged his worth. It was everyone else that was the problem.

It looked like he would have to prove himself after all.
"Honestly! Would it have been that difficult to just stop by and let me know where you were going?" Natalia stood, her hands on her hips, her piercing olive eyes sending daggers through her fiancé's green. "I searched half the castle looking for you the other night!"

"Look, I said I was sorry, I had something important to do," Asch repeated for the sixth time.

Natalia let out a sigh, there was no getting through to him when he was like this. The night he had finally returned home, he just up and vanished for a good hour. When he did finally turn up, grinning from ear to ear, he had been in the best mood she'd seen him in for quite awhile. It obviously had something to do with Luke. The way he showed no signs of remorse whatsoever as she lectured him meant that it had to have involved his younger brother in some way. She just couldn't comprehend any of it, Luke was nothing but trouble.

"You almost ready?" Asch asked as he made his way to the door. "We don't want to be late."

"No, we certainly don't." She smiled back. "Especially after all the work you and Father have done with this peace treaty."

"Alright, then I'll meet you in the throne room," Asch gave her a quick kiss on the cheek before excusing himself and heading downstairs. Natalia quickly made the last of her preparations, it was an important day after all, and she had to look presentable. Everyone, Luke included, had been summoned to the throne room for the announcement of her father's decision regarding Malkuth's plea for peace.

Why Luke had to be present was beyond her, but Asch had insisted, as had the Fon Master, so far be it from her to deny their wishes. Natalia quickly began to pull back her hair. She didn't know why Luke's presence irritated her so. Perhaps she felt like he was stepping into their world, and that wasn't where he belonged. This was her and Asch's place, not his. A knock came on the door.

"Princess, are you prepared? Most of the guests have arrived and are awaiting your presence to begin."

Now was not the time for such petty feelings, he would be there, and then hopefully he would leave, and it would be over with. Then perhaps she could finally get more than a few stolen moments with her fiancé. Luke had already monopolized enough of his time.

"Yes, I'm ready. I'll be right down."

The sun was shining when Luke slipped out of the manor's gates followed by one of his family's guard. In spite of everything that had happened, he still needed an escort if he left the manor. Luke felt surprisingly awake all things considered. He hadn't slept well for the past few days. Not since he had overheard that conversation in the drawing room.

It hadn't helped that Asch had been stuck up at the castle the entire time, so he couldn't even talk to him about it. He had tried Asch's trick of talking through their fon slots, but he hadn't managed to figure it out, and so, he kept his worries to himself. He had tried talking to Guy a few times, but for whatever reason, he just didn't feel comfortable discussing it with him.

He looked up at the castle; he hoped he would get a chance to talk to Asch about the entire ordeal before whatever mission their father had been talking about would take place. For now, he was
headed to the throne room, they were making the official announcement on the decision regarding Malkuth's letter and Luke had been thrilled to find out that they wanted him to be there. He hadn't actually received the summons yet, but Asch had given him a quick heads up earlier, so he figured he'd head over, it wouldn't hurt to be a little early.

No sooner had the thought gone through his mind than a castle messenger passed by. The boy stopped in his tracks and gave Luke a second look, surprised to see him answering the summons he had yet to deliver. "Sir," the boy began, "Your presence is requested at the castle immediately, however it looks like you are already on your way there?"

"I am," Luke said with a chuckle, "but thanks for the message, I'll be there right away."

"Alright, I'll report back that you will be attending."

"Please do, thank you for your hard work." The boy blushed a bit, unused to receiving a compliment from one of Luke's station, but he immediately turned and ran back to the castle to deliver his reply.

Luke didn't rush, he knew he was still early, and knowing Natalia who would likely have been in charge of issuing the summons, the boy was sent much earlier than necessary as it was. In her mind all he did ever was sleep and crawl out of bed when he was needed for something, and take half the morning to do it too. Oh and distract Asch. He had never heard her yell at him about that one before.

The large doors of the castle opened and in the entrance hall Luke spotted Jade patiently waiting near the bottom of the stairs, while Anise and Ion stood off to the side. Ion spotted him almost immediately and waved hello, which drew Anise's attention to the latest arrival.

"Oh hey Luke, how are things going?" The young Fon Master Guardian inquired, with all the perk and cheerfulness Luke had come to expect of her.

"Pretty good, have you been enjoying Baticul?"

"You bet! Asch gave us a huge room with the biggest bed I'd ever seen in my life! It was so comfy! And the room was nicer than the suites at a luxury hotel!" Leave it to Asch. Anise babbled on about the size and lavishness of the room that she had been allowed to use. He certainly knew how to make Anise happy. He hadn't seen her that excited…ever. Ion was laughing as Anise continued her chattering.

"That sounds like Asch for you. He seems antisocial sometimes, but he tends to pick up on those kinds of things." Luke provided even though Anise was still wrapped up in her ramble.

"It sounds like the two of you are doing better," Ion commented.

"Yeah, I guess you could say that. How about you? Have you been enjoying Baticul?"

"I have. Thank you very much for the tour yesterday."

"It was my pleasure, I had fun too."

"Oh you just enjoyed talking to that girl down at the port," Anise teased.

"Really? After you spent the last few weeks clinging to my brother, who's engaged by the way, you're going to lecture me about hitting on people?" Luke shot back.
"I wouldn't recommend it Anise, that's one I think even Luke could win." Jade stepped into their conversation.

"Hey, now what is that supposed to mean?" Luke retorted trying to suppress the latest heart attack the unexpected comment from Jade had caused him. That was one thing he wasn't going to miss, that was for sure.

"Nothing, I assure you."

"Gee, I wonder why I don't believe you."

Before Jade could retort, the castle doors opened again, and Tear walked in, with none other than Grand Maestro Mohs accompanying her. Luke groaned, he had forgotten that Mohs would have been invited too.

"So you think the Seventh Fonstone is in Akzerieuth?" Tear asked.

"Yes, and with a group heading up there shortly-"

"Hey Tear," Luke interrupted, sending a grumbling Mohs off to wait for the audience to begin. "Where have you been the past couple days?"

"Oh I'm sorry," Tear answered, "I was busy with my report and briefings with Grand Maestro Mohs. I did try and stop by yesterday but I was told you were out."

"I bet she came by while you were giving me and Ion that tour of the city," Anise offered. "It's a real shame you didn't come Tear, you could have watched Luke hitting on someone."

"First of all, I was not hitting on her; she asked me how to find the coliseum."


"You're just trying to get back at me because I didn't tell you Asch was engaged." Luke shot back sticking his tongue out.

"Fine we'll just have to ask Tear who she believes."

"I think I'm going to have to go with Luke on this one. It would be pretty rude not to give someone directions if they were lost," Tear replied.

"Booo," Anise stuck her tongue out at Luke and everyone laughed.

"What's so funny over here?" Guy asked, making Luke jump a foot in the air.

"Have you been taking lessons from Jade or something?" Luke gave Guy a suspicious glare.

"Not anymore than you have. I couldn't believe it when I woke up and they told me you were already gone to the castle."

"Uh oh," Anise giggled. "Someone's being a bad influence."

"I have no idea what you mean," Jade replied innocently.

"Who said I meant you Colonel?" Anise asked slyly. Jade had no reply.

"I think Anise won that one." Guy chuckled.
"Better write it down, it'll never happen again." Luke added.

"Hey!" Anise's protest was interrupted but the doors at the top of the stairs creaking open and a loud voice that called all guests to the throne room.

The entire group climbed the stairs, just like they had a few days previous and walked into the throne room. Everything was the same as it had been then. The sun shone in though the same windows, and the advisors all stood in their respective places, with King Ingobert and his lovely daughter on the throne. The only difference was that the third throne was now occupied by Luke's twin brother, the seat giving him an authoritative air that they'd never noted in him before.

"I thank you all for coming," King Ingobert began, "as you all know, we have received a letter from Malkuth. This letter outlines a request for peace between our warring countries. We have decided to formalize a peace treaty with them. However, the letter, while detailing the proposal for peace, also contained a plea to help save Akzerieuth."


"The mining town of Akzerieuth has been consumed by miasma, a deadly poison that seeps up from Gnome's domain." Ingobert replied.

"But there wasn't anything wrong with Akzerieuth when we passed through there a couple weeks ago!"

"On the contrary," Jade interrupted, "the problem was present, however, at the time it was isolated in the lower mines. I confirmed it myself. They had it somewhat contained, however, I doubt that containment would have lasted more than a few days. It is likely that the entire city is engulfed in the miasma by now." Luke simply stood in shock. He had no idea that such a problem existed and right under his nose too!

"Malkuth has proposed a joint operation to evacuate the citizens of the city," the king continued, "however, a messenger pigeon arrived yesterday with a message from the Malkuth troops. A recent landslide has completely blocked the road to Akzerieuth, and so it has fallen to us to rescue them."

"So we shall send a team of soldiers," one of the advisors spoke up, "along with an ambassador from Kimlasca."

"Your Majesty?" Ion spoke up.

"Yes Fon Master?"

"If you will allow me, I would like to assist as well. It was Emperor Peony's request that I assist in creating peace between the two countries, and as such I would like to see this through to the end."

"But Fon Master."

"Please allow me to do this." Ion reiterated, with a determination in his voice Luke had never heard before.

"As you wish Fon Master, though I urge against it, it is not my place to deny your wishes."

"I will go as well," Jade offered, "as a representative and ambassador for Malkuth."

"Your Majesty," Mohs jumped in, "I would also like to send Tear on behalf of the Order of Lorelei."
"Then both of you may participate as well."

"If you don't mind my asking, Your Majesty," Jade spoke up, "who will be the ambassador for Kimlasca?"

"Ah yes, that task will fall upon Luke." As soon as Luke heard his own name spoken, this mission and all its implications hit him. This was what his father had been talking about that night! A dangerous journey... one where they would only send one of them... one from which they would not return. So, in the end they really had chosen him to go die. Wait... how did they know someone would die?

"But!" Asch stood up out of his throne in protest. They had talked about an ambassador, and he had been shocked that sending Luke had even been on the table. Not that he didn't trust his little brother could be a great representative for Kimlasca, he did; something just seemed wrong about the whole affair. Luke hardly had the experience something like this would take, and he had never been involved in Palace affairs before. Why now all of a sudden? Asch had spent the larger part of the past few days arguing the point, and by then end he thought they'd finally agreed to let him go instead. Luke couldn't go to Akzeriuth alone like that... who knew what could happen there.

"Tear," the king ignored Asch's interruption, "You can read the Score, can you not?"

"Yes your Majesty."

"Would you please read the Score on this fonstone?" He requested passing a small stone to her. Tear closed her eyes and focused, the stone shone a dull green, responding to the fonons that passed through it.

"ND2000." Tear's voice came out flat, speaking monotonously words that weren't hers. "In Kimlasca shall be born the scion of Lorelei's power. He will be of royal blood with hair of red. He shall be called the 'light of the sacred flame' and he will lead Kimlasca-Lanvaldear to new prosperity. ND2018. The young scion of Lorelei's power shall bring his people to the miner's city. There..." Tear trailed off, her voice regaining its melodic tones. "The rest is missing."

"But Uncle!" Asch still protested.

"Asch, your father and I have already discussed this and we decided that Luke will be the one to go."

"Well it is Luke that means 'light of the sacred flame'," Ion offered in attempt to console him.

"Fon Master Ion is right," Tear agreed. "The Score clearly refers to Luke." Their attempts were to no avail; Asch still sat uncomfortably in his seat listening to the further discussions. Luke on the other hand hadn't said a word. Whatever cheer he had was instantly gone. He stood solemnly, seemingly zoned out as everyone discussed the details about the journey, and the necessary preparations.

Natalia watched Luke from her seat next to her father. Why was he so upset? After being chosen to represent Kimlasca on such a noble mission, he was sulking! And after having taken the spot from Asch who had so hoped to get it! Was he not proud to represent his country, the country that one day she and his brother would rule over together? Of course not. That meant work for him, regardless of how many others it would help. How could he be so selfish?


"No I'm not upset, it's just-" everyone turned to look at Luke, "No, it's nothing. If you don't mind
my asking, did Master Van ever show up? He was supposed to have met us here in Baticul."

Luke decided, he couldn't talk to Asch about it now, not with so much hanging on his new role as an ambassador. He didn't want to sound like he was just trying to get out of it, and he knew that's what it would sound like. He didn't have enough information. At the very least maybe Master Van would know something since he had been in Akzerieuth at the time too.

"He did arrive, but he was immediately arrested and placed in the dungeons," one of Ingobert's advisors replied.


"He is suspected of having played a role in your recent disappearance. Until he is cleared, he will remain in our custody."

"Master Van didn't have anything to do with me disappearing!"

"Perhaps, but to go on word alone…"

"Then how about we make a deal? Put him under my command for this endeavour. Let him prove himself by having him accompany us to Akzeriuth. If he can successfully assist with the evacuation, then you will release him."

Asch sat up, he was impressed by Luke's negotiating skills, though he had to suppress a small chuckle at Luke's misconception of his role as an ambassador. He wasn't actually commanding anyone, but the thought was there. He too had been against throwing Van in the dungeon; despite the fact that it was kind of nice to know the man wasn't causing any trouble anywhere. Yet with Mohs as the more likely suspect and Malkuth's letter safely in Baticul, Van didn't seem nearly the threat he had once been. None-the-less, he was still someone who conveniently had too much information.

The advisors discussed it among themselves for a moment. Even they couldn't hold him indefinitely, and this wasn't a bad idea, they certainly could use all the help they could get. "Fine, we shall grant your request," they finally answered. "You will have the assistance of Dorian General Grants if he agrees to the terms. We will send someone to release and brief him. If you would like to speak with him personally, you may do so after we've concluded our audience here."


"Then we will send one platoon of soldiers, along with Dorian General Grants, and all present who will be participating. Luke you may bring any others of your choosing."

"Hey Luke," Guy spoke up. "Do you think you'd mind dragging me along with you?"

"You'd come with me?"

"Of course I would come with you. Come on now, why wouldn't I?"

Luke managed a small smile, "Thanks."

"Father," Natalia spoke up, "I wish to participate as well."

"No Natalia, we've already been through this, you and Asch have duties to attend to here. You will not be going to Akzerieuth," Ingobert replied sternly. "You will depart tomorrow morning." The king returned his attention to the group before him. "Until then, you are all dismissed. Thank you
for your time." Ingobert stood up, followed by Asch and Natalia, and they exited the room. The first to leave was Mohs. The rest of the group lingered for awhile, but eventually moved out of the throne room.

"Congratulations Luke," Ion said once they had made it down the stairs.

"Hm? What for?"

"For being chosen as an ambassador of course," Ion replied with a smile.

"Yeah, thanks."

"You don't sound very excited about it," Anise commented.

"Sorry, I just have a lot on my mind." Luke said half-heartedly. "I think I'm going to go talk with Master Van. I want to explain things to him myself."

"That's probably a good idea," Ion agreed. "We should go prepare for tomorrow as well."

"Good point Ion." Anise answered, "So I guess we'll see you here first thing in the morning then."

"Alright, see you." Luke waved to them as they left.

"I think I'll go make a few preparations myself." Jade spoke up.

"Yes, it's best to be well prepared; we don't know what we'll face." Tear commented.

"There's no saying what we'll encounter," Guy agreed. "So, we meet up here first thing in the morning then?"


"Alright then, we're off on another adventure!" Guy patted Luke on the back. "Cheer up Luke, it'll be fun, besides, Asch is a big boy, he can take care of himself just fine." Luke smiled, Guy had completely missed the point, but he appreciated the gesture. If things were really as they seemed, Asch wasn't the one he was worried about...

"See you all tomorrow." Luke said as his three friends left to tend to their affairs. He had his own matters to see to as well, turning around and making his way down to the dungeon.

Luke knew the way surprisingly well. He had loved hiding down here when they used to play hide and seek at the castle. Natalia had always been too scared to come down on her own, so she'd never find him. Luke chuckled at the memory, walking down the steep stone steps. He hoped Master Van would be able to help him out, or at the very least provide a bit more information on just what his father and, who he now knew had been his uncle, had been talking about.

"Master Van!" Luke picked up the pace when he saw his instructor at the other end of the room. He was accompanied by one of the guards.

"I've informed him of the conditions on his release and briefed him about the situation with Akzerieuth," the soldier provided.

"Thank you," Luke acknowledged, dismissing the guard, who took his leave.

"Master Van, are you alright?"

"I'm fine Luke. I heard about what you did for me earlier. Thank you."

"It was the least I could do, since it was my fault you got thrown in here in the first place. But I don't get it; it's not like Uncle to jump to conclusions like that."

"I have a feeling I may know why they were so quick to judge the matter."

"Really? Why is that? You've never done anything to them, have you?"

"Not that they can prove, but I expect they've their suspicions all the same."

"What are you talking about?" Luke asked curiously.

"Luke, has anyone ever told you the truth about the kidnapping?"

"Kidnapping? What kidnapping?" Luke asked with a nervous laugh. Not just anyone was privy to that. Master Van couldn't possibly know about-


Luke froze on the spot. How did he know about that? While the actual kidnapping itself couldn't be completely covered up, the details about it was one of their family's most closely guarded secrets. Even most of the servants were clueless. The only ones who knew were those who had been there that day. The day when one Fabre boy had become two. Wait! If he knew about the kidnapping, that meant he also knew that Luke was-!

"Relax Luke." Van noticed Luke's sudden panic. "Now, I'll ask again, has anyone ever told you what really happened back then?"

"No." Luke finally admitted. It was a shady topic at best with everyone, including Asch. He had only ever asked him once, and the pain it had invoked from his sibling detoured him from ever asking again. He had never seen Asch that upset over anything. So he made due with what he did know. He knew that Asch had been kidnapped, and they had found him while searching for his older brother. He would have liked to know more, but it was a sacrifice he was more than willing to make, if only to keep Asch from feeling that way ever again.

"Seven years ago," Van began. "I came into the Fabre household, and took the family's only heir."

"What?" Luke covered his mouth, it had come out much louder than he expected. He lowered his voice again. "What? You were the one who took Asch? Why?"

"You heard the Score read upstairs, did you not?"

"Yeah, but it was cut off, we didn't hear it all."

"That's because it goes like this: ND2018. The young scion of Lorelei's power shall bring his people to the miner's city. There, the youth will turn power to calamity and be as a weapon of Kimlasca, destroying himself and the city."

It suddenly hit Luke: that was how his father and uncle had known that one of them would die. It was written in the Score.

Luke could feel his heart crawl up into his throat. He was far from being well versed on the topic,
but if there was one thing Luke knew about the Score it was this: the Score foretold the future, that future was absolute, and it was never wrong. For that very reason any Score that foretold one's death could not be revealed. No wonder they had censored the reading upstairs... but why? Why was all this happening?

No... Luke couldn't follow that train of thought; he just didn't have the strength to deal with it right now. Besides... he had more important thing to worry about. "Still... Luke finally spoke up. "What does that have to do with kidnapping Asch?"

"I found out the Score said that Asch would die... and I didn't want to see that happen. Asch had already been my student for some time, I couldn't accept that such a fate was in store for him and I knew something had to be done. So I decided to kidnap him, and then, I made you." Luke's eyes opened wide, shock wiping his mind clean. That particular implication hadn't even occurred to him. The one behind Asch' kidnapping was also the one behind his creation. All this time... it had been Master Van?

"M-me? But why?"

"You're not the one the Score mentions. You aren't bound to the fate it has laid out for Asch. Don't you see? You are the only one capable of saving Akzerieuth. If you can save the city where the Score says Asch would fail, then you can finally prove yourself and surpass Asch."

"But, can I really do it? I mean, the Score says Asch is supposed to go doesn't it?"

"Luke, don't worry about it so much. You are more than capable of filling Asch's place."

"Thanks," Luke's smile was transparent. In the end, even Master Van saw him as a replacement.

"Luke, it's very important that you don't tell anyone about this."

"Why not?"

"Because this information is not something that I should know, and certainly not something I should have told you. Revealing a Score of death is forbidden. I could get into a lot of trouble."


"Thank you Luke. If you don't mind, I do have one question for you though."

"What's that?"

"Have you given any thought as to what you plan to do in the future?"

"No..." Luke provided hesitantly. The question hit home a bit too painfully. "Why do you ask?"

"It's just that I feel it's my responsibility to see to your well being. It's a cruel fate I gave you. The future of this place belongs to Asch, and it leaves you with nothing doesn't it?" Luke solemnly nodded his head.

"Luke," Van said after a moment of tense silence. "Did you know that there are seven God-Generals?"

"Seven? I thought there were only six."

"You're technically right. We haven't had seven since the last one left our services many years ago. Right now, Cantabile of the 6th Division is filling in as Commander of Special Operations, but that
can't last forever, she has her own duties to attend to as well. Would you consider filling in that position?"

"You mean me? As a God-General?" This piqued Luke's interest. Was Van seriously offering him what he thought he was?

"You don't have to if you don't want to. I thought it's something you might enjoy. You wouldn't be confined to the city anymore, and you could still come and see everyone when you want to. It would give you something to work towards."


"Well don't be making any hasty decisions," Van chuckled. "Normally, God-Generals undergo extensive training and multiple trials before they are granted their title. How about we count Akzerieuth as your training? I realize that's very hurried, but if you can successfully pull off your job as ambassador, than I'll consider you ready, and that opportunity will be open to you. You can have as much time as you need to think about it and decide afterwards. Then if you so choose, you can join myself, Anise and the Fon Master in Daath."


"There, that's more like the Luke I know." Van smiled, a gesture Luke returned genuinely this time. "Now, let's be off to finish up preparations for tomorrow, I'm sure you remember, it won't be an easy journey."

"Yeah, let's go!"

Luke stepped out of the castle into the light of the setting sun and smiled. He finally had a future to look forward to.
The sun was still rising over the horizon when Luke approached the castle the next day. It wasn't often Luke was up this early, so he had never really seen the city at first light before. The calm morning air was fresh and the golden sky was breathtaking. It was a wonderful way to start such an important journey.

Luke had given Van's offer a lot of thought the previous night, though he remained somewhat undecided on the matter. While the opportunity was everything he dreamed for, he was still a bit reluctant to leave home. Then again, he would have to leave home eventually, and being in Daath was much better than being in a city where he didn't know anyone. This way he would still have Ion, Anise and Master Van around. And maybe he would get the chance to meet the other God-Generals when they weren't under orders to kill him, who knew, there was probably more to them than met the eye. It might not be too bad. He still had plenty of time to think it through, which made him much more comfortable about the whole thing. For now, Akzeriuth was a priority.

As Luke approached the castle gates, he noticed that both Guy and Master Van were already there and were busy talking. But as he got closer, he could clearly tell that it wasn't a friendly conversation.

"-and this isn't how it was supposed to happen!" Luke managed to catch the end of Guy's angry statement. He certainly had a lot of emotion for so early in the morning. But why was he upset at Master Van?


"What is it you want to make sure of?" Luke questioned.

"Just that the journey to Akzeriuth goes smoothly and that no one gets hurt unnecessarily." Van replied.

"Oh I see." Luke turned to Guy, "Don't worry, things are gonna go just fine." Luke reassured him with a smile Guy couldn't help but returning. But somehow, when that smile faded, he seemed more upset than before.

But Luke didn't have much time to contemplate just what had his best friend so agitated, since within a few minutes, the rest of their group had gathered. Anise was as perky as ever, making a stark contrast to Ion who was still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, betraying the fact that the rather smug looking Jade that wasn't far behind them had to come and wake them up. Tear came from the direction of the city, having stayed in the hotel where Mohs had also been staying so she was able to deliver her report and receive her mission detailing. They were almost set to go.

"So, now that we're all here, what's our course of action? Or is our ambassador heading in without any plans?" Jade taunted.

"Well, I looked into it last night, and we can either catch a ferry to Kaitzur, or we can go by land to Chesedonia and catch a ferry there. That takes us through the desert though, but it would be a lot quicker to catch a boat from here." Luke provided, earning him a combination of impressed and shocked looks from the group for being able to provide that information. They had all expected him to be clueless.
"It's not quite that simple." Tear interrupted.

"What makes you say that?" Guy inquired.

"Apparently yesterday at least one of the God-Generals tried coming into the city, but there was some kind of ruckus and they retreated. There's no saying how long that will last though."

"So the God-Generals might still be after Ion?" Luke questioned.

"Well, they may have had other reasons for entering the city, but to be safe, we should presume that that was their objective." Tear replied.

"And it seems my orders to leave the Fon Master be have gone unheeded." Van mentioned. "Aside from my sword, I won't be able to provide you with much more help in that regard."

"That should be fine." Jade provided, "With your hand in battle, they should hesitate a bit more before they consider attacking at the very least. In which case, I would think simply taking a ferry from here would be the most efficient route. We'll need to be on a boat regardless, whether it be from here or from Chesedonia. Getting there as soon as possible should be our priority."

"And there's no saying the God-Generals aren't waiting to ambush us outside the city either. We know for sure that at least one is outside the city, so I'd say leaving by boat is the safer of the options."

"Alright so we're taking the ferry to Kaitzur." Luke confirmed. "Excuse me," Luke turned to one of the nearby soldiers, "could you inform your captain that we will be departing on the ferry to Kaitzur and that the soldiers may board the ship whenever ready."

"Sir!" The soldier gave Luke a quick nod and headed off to find the captain in charge of the Akzeriuth mission.

"Master! Master!" Mieu impatiently bounced up onto Luke's shoulder. "Are we ready to go yet?"


"What can I say? It's as anxious as the rest of us to get rid of you." Asch teased as he opened the castle doors and stepped out, followed by Natalia and King Ingobert.

"And good morning to you too." Luke shot back, having fun pretending to be offended.

"I'm confused." Mieu's ears sagged. "I thought I was coming with Master…"

"You are. Asch was just teasing." Luke provided, his gaze never leaving his brother. "So what brings you guys out here?"

"We came to see you off." Natalia spoke up, as if their intentions had been the most obvious thing in the world. Luke saw Asch sigh and give him an apologetic look, but Luke offered an understanding smile. He was used to it by now.

"Yes," Ingobert spoke up, "It will be a difficult journey. Fon Master, are you certain of this? Akzeriuth will be far from safe. It is no place for one such as yourself."

"Thank you for your concern, but I will be fine. I have Luke and the others to protect me."

"Then I wish you a safe journey." Ingobert said with a defeated sigh.
"Yes, a safe journey to you all." Natalia said with a smile.

"Thank you Your Majesty. Princess." Jade said, nodding to them both. "But we should be off, the ferry departs shortly, and we should not delay."

"Yes, every moment we delay, more lives may be lost." Ion commented.

"Then we will leave you to your journey." Natalia replied. "May it be a successful one."

"Thank you." Ion said as the king and Natalia both returned inside, leaving only Asch in front of the castle.

"Come, let's head down to the port." Jade began ushering the group away. "Luke, I trust we'll see you there shortly?"

"Yes, I'll be down right away." Luke replied gratefully. Tear allowed herself to be ushered away; she saw what the Colonel had in mind now. Luke was heading out without Asch, probably for the first time in his life. For everything that Luke would have to deal with on his own over the course of this journey, he deserved a few moments to say goodbye to his family.

Asch and Luke watched everyone until they were out of sight, heading down the stairs and off to the port. Luke made a mental note to thank Jade for his perceptiveness later.

"Luke," Luke turned to face Asch who was talking to him, "are you sure about this?"


"Are you really sure you're ready for something like this? It's no small task and you didn't look so sure about it yesterday. If you don't feel up to it, we could switch. I'm done working at the castle for a little bit, so you wouldn't have to worry about that."

"No. It's really okay." Luke gave Asch a reassuring smile. "I admit, I was a little scared and overwhelmed about it all yesterday, but I've given it a lot of thought, and I know I can do this. You enjoy the break, you've deserved it. I'll be back before you know it."

Luke hadn't lied to Asch, he had thought about it a lot. About the Score, and about what Master Van had said. And if his being in danger could save Asch's life, he'd do it a thousand times over. Because, if he let Asch go to Akzeriuth, and something was to happen to him there, he would never forgive himself.

"Alright then." Asch said taking Luke's hands in his own. "But be careful…and be safe. I'll see you when you get home."

"Don't worry I will. Everything will be fine, you'll see." Luke let go of Asch's hand. "Stay out of trouble while I'm gone. I'll see you again soon." Luke smiled and waved as he turned and followed the group down towards the port.

He only hoped that he could keep his word.

Everyone was still standing on the dock when Luke finally caught up to them. The large ferry towered a couple stories above their heads, blocking the sun that was now gleaming as its reflection flickered in the waves. A single small staircase allowed entry onto the ship's upper deck.
It was sturdy, but narrow, only allowing a single file of passengers to board. From the looks of things, the soldiers had all boarded already, and the ferry was all prepared to set sail.

"What took you? The ship's about to leave." Anise called to Luke who immediately picked up the pace.

"Sorry, but thanks for waiting."

"Well then, let's get onboard before the ship leaves without us." Van chuckled, heading up the stairs.

"Yeah, let's get going." Guy agreed following in his stead. Not far behind him was Luke, followed by Tear, Anise and Ion, then Jade taking up the rear.

About halfway up the stairs, Guy suddenly stopped. Not noticing the blonde's sudden halt, Van continued on his way up to the deck.

"Hey Guy, What's the matter?" Luke tried peeking over his shoulder, but failed as he almost sent himself toppling into the water below. Guy didn't answer, his hand clutching his left arm. Had he hurt it somehow? But no sooner had Luke thought that, Guy let go of his limb, the evidence of his tight grip still showing in the fabric of his shirt. What had that been about?

"Guy?" The sudden movement surprised Luke and he leaned back just in time, his eyes wide open in shock as Guy's sword sent a few red hairs flying off on the ocean breeze.

"Guy what's the matter?!" Luke backed off, his balance being tested as he dodged several more swings before he made it back onto the docks.

Jade, who had sensed something was wrong, had already backed off, and the three others did their best not to trip over each other as they got out of Luke and Guy's way.

"Guy, what are you doing?!" Tear yelled as the young servant struck again and again at his distraught master. The clash of metal resonated in their ears as Luke was finally forced to draw his own blade.

"Something's wrong with him." Luke managed as he continued to block the tirade of blows coming from his best friend. Luke knew something wasn't right. The hatred in the look that was fixed on Guy's face, wasn't something the Guy he knew was even capable of. It scared him; because all that hatred was focused solely on him.

But despite Guy's movements and well placed blows, something about him was off. It was almost like he was unconscious. His actions weren't thought out, they were almost simply reactions. Could someone be controlling him somehow? Either way, Guy wasn't letting up any time soon, and there was a limit to how long Luke could keep this up. But what was he supposed to do? He couldn't attack Guy.

Without even moving, Jade stole a glance behind him. Then before anyone could react, he sent a spear flying into a pile of boxes drawing the attention of the rest of the group. A figure jumped out of its hiding place, swiftly avoiding the blow, landing on a pile of nearby crates as the tower of boxes crashed to the ground behind him.

"Sync!" Ion cried.

"Depart!" One of the sailors called, noticing the scramble taking place on the docks. They couldn't afford to risk the ship being damaged by some pointless scuffle on the ground, and that kind of
violence had no place on their decks.

"Wait what's going on?!" Van ran to the edge of the ship, but the stairs has already been retracted, and the ship was pulling away. He could only watch as the scuffle on the dock shrank in the distance, as the ship set sail for Kaitzur.

"Sync, what did you do to Guy?" Ion yelled at the God-General who was thoroughly enjoying the scene that played out before him.

"This is Sync's doing?" Tear inquired, trying to keep a leery eye on both the God-General and the fight between their companions.

"Luke!" Ion yelled to the redhead who almost took a hit when he turned to see what Ion wanted. "You have to knock him unconscious! Sync is using a curse slot to control Guy, you have to knock him out!"

Luke didn't look especially happy with that idea, but he didn't exactly have time to argue, or to come up with a better one. It certainly was better than fighting his best friend indefinitely.

Jade nodded his head at Tear who joined in the fray with Luke. While Guy couldn't be lured away from his assault on the young noble, at the very least she could distract him with attacks of her own. Jade watched, refusing to step away from his spot between the God-General and the Fon Master. Now that Ion had said something, he could see a glyph like pattern of blood that had soaked through Guy's white sleeve. A curse slot; that was no simple arte, Sync was certainly not to be trifled with.

Luke finally managed to land a hit to the blonde that sent him tumbling to the ground. Guy lay unconscious on the wet stone of the port as Luke knelt down to check the injury he had just incurred. Sync grinned, and taking advantage of Luke's lowered guard, launched himself at the redhead.

Sync screeched to a stop as a fonic arte crashed into the ground before him. He jumped backwards, dodging several arrows that were also sent his way.

"Luke, are you okay?" Asch ran to Luke's side. "What happened here? You were supposed to be gone already." He inquired, never taking his eyes off Sync.

"Sync was using some kind of arte to control Guy. We had to knock him out to get him to stop attacking." Luke replied, standing up and joining his sibling.

"Are you alright?" Natalia asked as she moved beside Tear, never lowering her bow that was fixed on Sync.

"I am. Thank you." Tear replied, as she too faced down the rather displeased Sync that stood before them.

"I'd say you're rather outnumbered." Jade commented.

"Oh I'm not out of the running quite yet." Sync smugly announced.

Asch suddenly cried out, grabbing Luke's shoulder to maintain his balance. He could feel the blood trickling down his leg. Everyone glanced behind them to see Guy, who was still lying on the ground, with his sword in hand. The tip had managed to slice the back of the elder sibling's leg. Natalia turned her bow on the blonde. But his hand was trembling from the effort, and the sword fell to the ground with a clang that seemed to resonate through the empty docks. Guy collapsed,
unconscious again.

"He woke up." Sync commented, "That's some pretty intense hatred there. He may be more fun than I thought."

"What do you mean by that?" Luke almost hissed at the boy. Not only his best friend but his brother now?!

"Hmph." Sync cocked his head, the smug grin on his face indicating he had no intention of answering. Luke redrew his sword. "I'm outnumbered, so I'll retreat. I've accomplished my mission for the time being." Sync stated.

"Get back here!" Luke yelled after the retreating God-General.

"Luke!" Jade interrupted, "Let him go for now. We can't afford to get caught up in a fight with him right now."

"I know." Luke sheathed his sword as everyone else also put their respective weapons away. He turned and knelt beside Guy. "What are we going to do with him? Is he going to attack us again when he wakes up?"

"He should be fine now that Sync's gone." Ion also knelt down beside Guy. "The power of a curse slot depends on the proximity of the user. That's why Sync had to be here on the docks. Otherwise it wouldn't have worked."

"I'm more worried about what he had said about having 'accomplished his mission'." Asch stated. "He couldn't have been after Ion, and other than make us miss the boat- Ow!" Asch winced as Luke poked his injury on the back of his leg. Fortunately he had been standing far enough away from Guy that the cut was pretty shallow. "It's nothing." Asch looked over his shoulder at Luke who was still examining it.

"It won't be nothing if it gets infected." Luke stated as he took the bottom of his jacket and, much to Tear's utter shock, ripped a strip off the bottom, and used it to bandage his sibling's leg. Tear watched on and almost couldn't believe it. How many times had he complained about getting that coat dirty or wet over the course of their last journey? More than she could remember, he loved that thing, and yet here he had just ripped it apart. Maybe she took for granted just how close the two of them really were.

"It is possible that he had accomplished whatever mission he had to do before interfering with us." Jade pointed out as Luke was fixing Asch up.

"And since when have we ever been that lucky?" Anise asked.

"I'm simply stating the possibility." Jade shrugged.

"Now," Luke stood up having finished for the time being. Once he got back to the castle they could dress it properly. "What are you two doing down here?"

"We're coming with you." Natalia stated.

"What?" Luke spun around to face the princess.

"That's right; we're coming to Akzeriuth with you." Asch repeated. "I don't care what Uncle says, you'll need all the extra help you can get."
No! Luke spun around and his gaze met Asch's. Asch wasn't joking; he was serious, and very determined. But Asch couldn't go to Akzeriuth! Luke had to fight to keep his growing panic in check. Natalia, he would more than happily do without, but could deal with if he had to, but what if something happened to Asch?! He had to find someway to keep him from coming, and fast.

The second ferry pulled into the port. It was a bit smaller than the one that had departed earlier, but it too went to Kaitzur. People began to disembark, and everyone ceased their discussions, as they waited for the crowd to leave. Many people got off the ship, a few of the Baticul residents waved to Asch and Luke as they passed, a gesture Luke nervously returned. The sailors quickly made preparations for the next round of passengers to board.


"Master Asch! Lady Natalia!"

Asch grabbed Luke by the arm and they ran up on to the ferry, closely followed by the rest of the group. They ducked down around the port side, out of sight of the guards that were searching for the missing couple. "Sorry Luke," Asch whispered, "Can this wait until later?"

Luke was silent for awhile before finally managing an answer. "Yeah… sure."

Luke once again found himself in the open ocean, staring out at the sea. They were only about half a day behind the ship that Master Van and the soldiers had been on, which was good. The trip to Kaitzur would take a few days, which would give them all a chance to recover from their unexpected encounter that morning.

"Are you sure he'll be okay?" Luke asked Ion once everyone else had left the room.

"I am. I know you're worried about him, but try not to; he just needs some time to recover. He pushed himself to his limits earlier fighting it."

"Will it happen again?" Luke watched Guy resting, his chest rising and falling rhythmically.

"Unless the curse slot is removed, there is the possibility that it will. But as long as Sync isn't around, he'll be fine."

"Just what is a curse slot anyways?"

"A curse slot is an arte that's applied directly to a person's fon slots. It stirs up memories and uses them to control a person."

"I see. So you're sure he'll be fine right?"

Ion giggled. "I'm certain Luke. Now come on, let's leave him get some rest. He's got a few days to build his strength back up before we reach Akzeriuth."

"Alright, let's go get some fresh air then. Ion?"

"Yes, what is it Luke?"

"Thank you."

"You keep that up, and one of these days we're going to lose you in thought."
"Ha ha. Funny Asch."

"I try." Asch chuckled. "So what is it you wanted to talk about before?"

"Oh. Nothing important. I just… no it doesn't matter anymore."

Asch eyed Luke suspiciously. He didn't need the overwhelming sense of guilt and disappointment coming from Luke to tell him that he was lying. Why did Luke seem so upset about him tagging along. He had thought perhaps the resentment had entailed Natalia's participation, but it was clearly him. What could- and then an idea hit him.

"Hey, I'm not here to steal your job as ambassador. You're still in charge, I'm just here to help out, okay?"

"Yeah, thanks."

"Cheer up a bit; you're going to make Kimlasca look a pretty depressing place with a face like that."

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"There you go, that's better." Asch laughed. "I want to talk to you about some stuff later so stop by my room sometime."

"Okay I will." Luke said with as much cheer as he could muster. Asch smiled and walked off, meeting up with Natalia along the way.

Luke's heart was in his throat. The day had started so well, but now as he watched his older brother happily chatting with his fiancée over by the railing, he couldn't get rid of the pit that had settled in the bottom of his stomach and threatened to make him sick.

There was no way for him to stop Asch from coming to Akzeriuth now.
"You feeling okay Luke?" Guy stood against the railing next to his best friend. "You don't look so well."

"I'm fine." Luke replied.

"You know you're not fooling anyone right?" Guy gave him a rather skeptic look. "But if you don't want to talk about it, that's okay."

"Thanks Guy. But I should be the one asking you that after what happened the other day."

"I'm fine Luke." Guy chuckled having been asked that several times over the past couple days. "You worry too much."


"There'll be plenty of time to worry once we reach Akzeriuth. We'll be arriving in Kaitzur later today, so try and relax a bit until we get there."

Akzeriuth.

"Guy, can I ask you something?"

"What is it Luke?"

"What was it like when your family died?"

"What the- Where did that come from all of a sudden?"

"You don't have to answer if you don't want to." Luke said after a moment of silence.

"Well it's not that." Guy grew serious, what had gotten into Luke all of a sudden? "To be honest, I don't remember when they died."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I remember everything up until that moment, and I remember what happened afterwards, but I don't have any idea of what really went on in between. I think somewhere along the way, I blocked it out. Some things are just too painful to carry with you, you know?"

"I can understand that." Luke admitted.

"Now are you going to tell me what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong."

"You're worried about Akzeriuth aren't you?"

Luke was silent. Their impending arrival was exactly what he was worrying about. Luke desperately wished he had more information. How was Asch supposedly going to die? What exactly was going to go wrong? Even if he knew, would there be any way to even stop it? It was written in the Score.
"Well, I don't blame you for being nervous; a lot of people are riding on your shoulders. But don't forget you have the rest of us, including Asch, here with you. Try not to get too worked up about it." Guy said as he unsuccessfully attempted to console his friend. Luke felt his stomach lurch again at the thought of losing his brother. He just - he couldn't think about it. It wasn't going to happen, he wouldn't let it.

'What's the matter? You're not getting seasick on me up there are you?' Luke clearly heard the voice resonate in his mind.

'No I'm not!'

'There you go. You're getting the hang of it now.'

'Oh? You heard me that time?'

'I did. You're doing really well. It took me a lot more than two days to get it figured out.'

'Yeah well, I had the advantage of having you teach me. You had to figure it out on your own.'

'True, but it still says something for your abilities.'

'Are you implying I'm getting better than you are?'

'I told you before, don't aim for the impossible.'


"Nothing really." Asch heard Luke reply as he closed off their connection and let them be. Luke had been absolutely fraught with worry the whole time Guy was out, which ended up being about half the morning. Everyone had been so annoyed with his constant pacing and badgering, that they were all just about ready to knock him out too. But Guy had woken up, and just like they had all assured Luke countless times, he had been just fine.

"Are you coming, Asch?" Natalia asked for the second time. Honestly, what was with him lately? He was constantly daydreaming, and it was getting annoying to have to go fetch him out of his own little world every time she wanted his attention.

"Sorry Natalia, what was that?"

"I asked you if you wanted to come up on the deck with me." Natalia let out a huge sigh. "We'll be arriving soon so I thought we could wait above deck with the others."

"What's the matter?" Asch inquired, noticing her distress.

"Lately you seem so distracted all the time. If you're not speaking with Luke or one of the others, you're off in your own little world. I mean, this is the first trip we've taken outside of Baticul since your kidnapping. I had hoped to enjoy some more time with you, that's all."

"I'm sorry Natalia. I know this is important to you, but remember that this isn't just a vacation. There are a lot of lives depending on us, and the peace treaty between our country and Malkuth is riding on our success."

"You're right, I'm sorry. That was selfish of me; of course you have a lot on your mind right now."
Natalia had to suppress the small amount of glee that arose in her every time she heard Asch call it 'their country'. She couldn't wait for the day the two of them would rule over it together, it would be the most beautiful and prosperous years Kimlasca had ever known, of that she was certain.

"It's not just you," Asch said softly as he gave her a gentle hug, "I have been busy lately. How about after all this is over, we do something special? Just the two of us."

"That sounds wonderful." Natalia smiled as Asch let go and took her hand. "I'll hold you to that."

"I wouldn't have it any other way. Now let's go."

"Yes. For Akzeriuth, and for Kimlasca."

The ferry pulled into the Kaitzur docks just before midday. Scattered clouds cast their shadows on the open fields that still lay between the group and their destination. It didn't take long for everyone to disembark and gather in the port.

"So first things first," Luke spoke up once everyone had gathered, "where are Master Van and the soldiers?"

"Yes," Jade agreed, "We should locate the remainder of our forces. Their ship should have arrived first thing this morning."

"Well I don't see anyone around." Guy mentioned taking a second look just in case.

"How about we check in with headquarters here and see if he checked in with them when he arrived." Jade suggested.


"We are, why?"

"You are Master Luke I presume?"

"Yeah that's me, why did anything happen?"

"No. Dorian General Grants left a message saying he was taking the troops on ahead to Akzeriuth and that he would await your arrival there."

"Thank you." Luke dismissed the guard.

"So I guess we're heading straight for Akzeriuth, huh?" Anise pitched in.

"Are we going to try and make the trip in one day again?" Tear inquired curiously.

"No. We wouldn't make it before nightfall, and besides, we'll need our strength for once we reach the city."

"Jade's right." Asch agreed. "How about we camp at the base of Deo Pass tonight? We should be able to make it to Akzeriuth from there in about half a day." Everyone nodded in agreement. "That sound good to you Luke?"
"Oh! Uh, yeah... sure."

"Really now," Natalia pitched in, "you're worse than Asch is with all that daydreaming you do!"


"Guy! I told you yesterday not to refer to me like that while we're away. We don't want anyone finding out I'm the princess."

"Yeah, the poor things, they'd be so devastated, they'd probably move to Malkuth." Anise mumbled under her breath. Luke bit his lip to keep from laughing, but couldn't hide the grin.

"What was that?" Natalia demanded.

"Oh nothing!" Anise said with her best innocent smile on.

"Well now that we're done having fun, let's move along, shall we?" Jade said with a grin.

"Yes let's," an indignant Natalia agreed. "Don't fall behind now." She shot back at Anise.

"Oh don't worry; we'll keep an eye on her." Jade said in the creepiest possible way.

Luke rolled his eyes. At least Jade had the right idea, or at least, Luke hoped he did. He had every intention of keeping his eye on Asch. While he may not be able to stop Asch from coming, it certainly wouldn't stop him from looking out for his sibling.

He only hoped it would be enough.

As planned, the trip took the rest of the day and night had fallen by the time they reached the base of Deo Pass. Taking a valuable lesson from previous experience, Luke was not allowed to lead the group, a job that Jade willingly accepted. While Luke often wondered if he purposely took the scenic route just to piss them off, they had still made relatively good time. He certainly wouldn't put it past Jade.

Setting up camp was relatively easy, the surrounding rock formations giving them a natural shelter, and soon they all found themselves sitting around a roaring fire that Mieu had gratefully started.

"Hey Jade?" Guy's question silenced the chatting and shared mirth that had been taking place around the campfire.

"Yes Guy, what is it?"

"I've been meaning to ask you about that fon disk. I gave you the papers since I couldn't make heads or tails of any of it, and you never did tell me if you got anything figured out."

"Ah yes, my apologies, I meant to share but we got a bit distracted somewhere along the way." Jade pushed his glasses back up his nose and waited a moment to be sure he had everyone's attention.

Asch in particular was drawn by the question that Guy had posed, but for very different reasons. He had… personal interests to look out for. Asch stole a glance at Luke. He couldn't quite make out how Luke was feeling, which was an oddity all in itself, but as soon as he caught sight of his little brother, he knew why.
Luke had completely frozen up. His eyes were open wide and he was tenser than Asch had ever seen him. If someone were to walk up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder, Luke would probably jump a couple feet in the air. Asch just didn't get it. Was he that afraid?

Asch had always known Luke was a bit apprehensive about being a replica. Maybe it was because Luke was so open with him about it, that he had never noticed just how carefully Luke hid it from the rest of the world. And this wasn't just anyone, these were his friends. People he knew and respected and looked up to. He wasn't just scared; he was downright terrified of them finding out. He didn't want to be abandoned, he didn't want to be alone.

Now that was a feeling Asch could understand.

"To be honest," Jade continued, "there wasn't much else that I was able to figure out either. Most of the information was too scattered to make heads or tails of. Exactly what Dist and Sync were working on, I cannot say. The only thing I do know is that it involves fomicry."

"Isn't fomicry that technology they use to replicate things?" Anise inquired.

"Yes, that's correct." Jade confirmed.

"So like isofons?" Guy inquired.

"No, replicas look the same; but they have their own fonon frequencies. Fomicry can't create isofons."

"If you don't mind my asking, what is an isofon?" Natalia asked.

"Well, you know that all matter emits a fonon frequency that is unique to itself, right?" Tear spoke up.

"Yes, a fonon frequency is like a fingerprint, no two are the same." Natalia recited, recalling a lesson she had on the topic, some time ago.

"Right. Isofons have identical fonon frequencies; of course, they don't exist unless they are artificially created."

"Thank you Tear." Natalia smiled at the other girl.

"You're welcome." Tear returned the gesture.

Asch watched Luke. This conversation was most definitely not helping his nerves.

"The other interesting thing that came up was Lorelei's fonon frequency." Jade continued on as he flipped through the stack of papers.

"You mean as in the aggregate sentience of the Seventh Fonon?" Asch finally spoke up. Why on earth had Lorelei's fonon frequency shown up on the disc? Shouldn't it have been his and Luke's?

"Yes, that's correct." Jade confirmed.

"Why would Lorelei's fonon frequency show up? Last I heard, its existence hadn't been confirmed." Guy spoke up.

"Lorelei hasn't been observed," Asch confirmed, "but do you think the God-General's plan could have something to do with it?"
"It's possible, but unlikely. My best guess would be that it showed up because of the fomicry. Fomicry consumes a large amount of Seventh Fonons; Lorelei's fonon frequency may just have been detected and recorded due to an excess amount of fonons during the replication process."

Asch wondered if that was really the case. It was certainly something to keep in the back of his mind. He could look into it later; there were more pressing concerns at hand.

"Well, I think that's more than enough for one night." Jade placed the papers back in his bag. "It's getting late, and we have a lot to get done tomorrow."

"I wonder what they were trying to make!" Anise excitedly pondered as she helped put out the fire.

Asch couldn't help but smile as he watched Luke sitting across from the fire, relaxed, but now staring aimlessly into the night. He knew exactly what they had made, and he was eternally grateful that they did.

"Is it just me, or has Luke seemed awfully down lately?" Anise asked as they worked their way up the steep mountain trail.

"It's not just you," Tear commented as she watched the redhead who was out of earshot at the front of the group. "He has been upset about something recently."

"Why don't you go and cheer him up Tear?" Anise suggested.

"Me? Why me?"

"He seems to enjoy talking to you. Besides, I think he has a thing for you." Anise said with a devilish wink. Tear's face turned several shades of red.

"Wh-What? Are you sure?"

"Yep. Positive."

"Now, now Anise, let's not forget your last venture in to the realm of seduction." Jade taunted, having slowed his pace to match theirs.

"Shut up Colonel!" Anise pouted.

"Oh my, what adventure was this?" Natalia inquired.

"You know what, maybe I will go try and cheer Luke up." Tear interrupted. She wasn't going to be the one to have to tear the rather possessive princess off of Anise for hitting on her fiancée.

"Wait Tear! I'll come join you!" Anise ran after her.

"What? What is it?" A confused Natalia stared at the girls running ahead. Jade just couldn't resist, an evil grim spreading across his face.

"Well you see…"
"Aww that's too bad Tear, it looks like you lost your chance." Anise said as they noticed Ion who was now walking beside Luke and the two were talking.

"That's alright. The Fon Master could probably do a better job that I would anyways."

"I don't see why they have to spend so much time together." Anise mumbled.

"You're sounding an awful lot like a certain someone." Tear couldn't resist the taunt.

"Who, Princess Moody back there? No way!"

"She did what?!" The shrill could be heard from up front.

"I think that's my cue to run." Anise nervously looked behind her as she laughed and ran ahead, flying past Luke and Ion. She stopped at the very top of the hill, and didn't move until everyone came and joined her.

From where they were, they could see Akzeriuth, or rather; they should have been able to see Akzeriuth. All they could see was a dark purple mist that had settled into the valley where Akzeriuth would be.

"I think we'd best pick up the pace," Jade commented, "it seems we've come later than we thought."

The rest of the journey was downhill, so they proceeded as fast as they could without getting hurt, or wearing themselves out. Just how urgent the situation was hadn't really registered until they saw it. They couldn't afford to delay. But as always, things never go quite as planned.

The dirt in front of Luke exploded as the shot missed its mark, landing not an inch away from his foot.

"What the-" Luke instinctively stepped back, everyone's gaze immediately drawn to the God-General from which it had come.

"Major Legretta!" Tear exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to get you. You've spent enough time with these fools. You have no business here!"

"I'm under orders from Grand Maestro Mohs, why are you here?"

"Harassing our student again Legretta?" A second woman stepped up beside her colleague.

"Cantabile! What are you doing here?" Legretta viciously eyed the new arrival.

"Cantabile?" Guy curiously watched the second God-General.

"You know her Guy?" Luke inquired.

"No. But I've heard of her, she's the sixth God-General."

"Oh I thought I'd come along and keep you in check." Cantabile shrugged, answering Legretta's demand.
"I beg your pardon, but since when do I need babysitting, and from you no less." Legretta got defensive as she unconsciously lowered the gun she had aimed at the group.

"Oh I never said I was here to baby-sit you. But orders are orders and I figured you might want some back up."

"Since when am I believed to be that incompetent?" Legretta's tone was getting vicious; Cantabile's growing grin showing just how much she was enjoying every moment of it.

"I don't know." She taunted.

"You should, you two spend enough time together." Legretta spat.

"Oh I see what this is about," Cantabile said with a devilish grin. "You're jealous!"

"I harbour no such petty feelings, towards you least of all!"

"Are they always like this, Tear?" Jade asked as Tear only watched on in shock.

"Tear, you know them?" Luke inquired.

"Yeah. They both trained me when I was still young and trying to become a soldier. But I've never seen them fight like this before. But you know, now that I think about it, I don't think I've ever actually seen them together before."

"You think I don't know that the stupid Score has this entire world under its thumb?!" Cantabile yelled back at Legretta. "That why we do this! For the freedom of humanity!"

"Of course! People check the Score to see what to eat for supper! It needs to stop! I know that! Don't insult me."

"As much as I'd like to stay and listen to their plans..." Guy whispered.

"I agree," Jade said quietly as the two God-Generals continued to bicker. "Let's move onto Akzeriuth, before they notice we're gone."

Once they were out of sight, everyone began soft discussions of the scene they had just encountered, despite still being able to hear the yelling echoing in the distance. Even Anise, who had spent a significant amount of time with most of the God-Generals, had never seen any of them fight like those two had; although she could recall rumours of quite the rivalry between their respective squads. Only Guy was silent, occasionally peeking over his shoulder back in the direction of the two women they had just left behind.

It just couldn't be...

But Guy didn't get much of a chance to think about it.

They had finally made it to Akzeriuth.
Akzeriuth was completely unrecognizable. The blanket of miasma that had settled over the city blocked out the sun that otherwise would have have the city alight with the golden evening hues to which it was usually accustomed. Very little of that light made its way to the houses that dotted the cliff, and the haze it created made every step dangerous. With such poor visibility, it wouldnt take much to wander off the edge of a cliff and they could only wonder how many unfortunate people had already met their end in such a way before the miasma itself claimed their lives.

The populace wasn't fairing much better than the city itself. Streets were littered with emergency supplies, and with bodies. People sought to escape the miasma that had built up in their homes, only to find the streets just as suffocating. The sick were everywhere, intermingled among those that had already undertaken their eternal slumber, their children still sobbing in their lifeless arms.

It- It just couldn't be possible. How could things have gotten so bad? Luke stared in pure unadulterated shock at the devastation that lay before him. Only a few weeks ago, everything had been alive with hope and ambition. How did everything suddenly become this?

"Things are worse than I thought." Tear finally managed. "The miasma is thick. It has affected people a lot quicker than we had anticipated."

How could she be so calm like that? People were dying everywhere. Why were they even here? Why did they bother to come? What could they possibly do in the face of... of all this?

"Well then Luke?" Asch asked gently easily able to detect his siblings distress. "What first?" This would be Luke's true test. They were all bothered by just how far Akzeriuth had fallen, but would Luke be able to deal with it and fulfill his role as ambassador?

Luke stood in silent hysteria, oblivious to everyone's attention that was suddenly on him. He just couldn't...


"What.....what can we possibly do?" He said softly, fighting back the waves of despair that were overwhelming him. "There's too much... we can't... we can't do anything!"

"Luke!" Tear reprimanded him. "How could you say that?! What kind of message are you giving the citizens here? They're waiting for us to help them! We're their hope! And here you show up saying there's nothing we can do!"

"I know that! But-"

"We just have to do what we can." Asch tried to comfort Luke. "Even if it's just a little, we can still save more people then if we hadn't come at all."

"But.... I don't...." Luke trailed off.

"Okay. Tear, Natalia, can you see if you can rally up the sick and injured? Our first priority should be getting everyone out of the miasma. Only heal anyone enough for them to move, you'll need to save your strength. We can handle any more extensive healing after we get them out of here. Jade, Guy can each of you go with one of them and help them move people?" Asch took over.

"What about Van?" Tear inquired.
"He should be here already with the Kimlascan troops, but since we don't know what he's doing, we can't count on him for the time being. If you do come across him, find out what he's up to. It'll be wasted effort if we're working on something he has covered already."

"Alright." She confirmed.

"What about us?" Anise inquired.

"You and Ion are going to help me and Luke try and find anyone that isn't in the residential area. We'll split up: You and Ion can go together and check the upper working areas, I'll take some of the lower levels and Luke can check the middle levels."

"Okay!" Anise said with as much cheer as she could manage.

"We'll all meet back here in an hour and we'll decide where to go from there. We've only a few more hours of daylight, and this is going to be impossible once the sun sets."

Each of them with their allotted tasks, set off to work. Tear and Guy took the western residential areas while Natalia and Jade set off to the eastern one. Ion and Anise managed to track down one of the functioning lifts and began their search of the upper mining sections while Asch found his way to the lowest ones, leaving Luke alone to wander with his thoughts.

Luke had made it to the first tunnel before he came upon the sudden realization that he had let Asch out of his sight. If the state of the once peaceful mining town didn't already have him on edge, the sudden wave of worry for his sibling would have done just as well. How could he have been so stupid! He let Asch run off on his own. What if something were to happen to him?

Luke stopped wandering, closed his eyes and focused.

Where was Asch?

It was faint, much fainter than what he suspected Asch saw when he did the same, but he could sense Asch's presence at the back of his mind. He was talking to one of the watchman, showing him the safest route to take the workers to safety. Luke decided not to bother him. He was okay… for now.

Luke had debated several times as to whether or not he should warn Asch. At least let him know something was up, something was going to go wrong, that he might be in danger. But Luke would have to explain how he knew these things, and that was something he couldn't do. Even if it wasn't forbidden and Van hadn't asked him to keep it a secret; he couldn't be the one to tell Asch that he was going to die.

"Hey, can you help me over here?" A man from one of the nearby tunnels called out as soon as he saw Luke in the distance. The boy looked rather lost in thought, but unlike the most of the others in town, he still looked healthy and able.

Noticing the man, Luke ran over. "What's the matter?"

"I have a wife and two boys at home, but there are men still trapped in the mine. I can't leave them."

"Which mine is this?"
"Tunnel 14." He replied. "A whole group of workers went down in there and haven't come out. I'm getting worried; this was the tunnel the miasma first started coming out of, so it's especially thick down there."

"You go take care of your family, I'll go get my friends and we'll try and help the people stuck in the tunnel." Luke finally told the man after having contemplated it for a moment. He wouldn't be able to do this alone.

"Thank you." The man gratefully told Luke as he headed off towards the houses on the western edge of town.

Luke didn't find anyone else the rest of the way around, which gave him more than ample time to think, something that he just might have been better off not doing. His imagination enjoyed torturing him by providing the several thousand things that could possibly happen to Asch while he was wandering the empty streets. Eventually he made it back to where they had started and found everyone waiting, letting out a huge sigh of relief when he saw his brother among them.

"The eastern residents are all warned, they're in the process of evacuating. Several of the Kimlascan troops are assisting them." Natalia reported.

"Did you run into Master Van?" Luke inquired.

"No. We found several divisions of troops, but it seems that Dorian General Grants had gone off on his own to search through the mines." Natalia provided.

"Okay then now that the mines are evacuated." Asch began to give the next round of directions when Luke cut him off.

"Asch, there are a bunch of workers still stuck in Tunnel 14. I wanted to help them but the miasma is supposedly pretty thick down there so I came for help."

"Yes, several of the women that I met also mentioned they had husbands trapped in Tunnel 14." Tear added.

Asch smiled. He was glad to see Luke had somewhat recovered from the state he had been in when they first arrived. "Alright, we'll head down to Tunnel 14 while everyone else is still gathering."

"Good job Luke." Asch said once everyone had left. "See you can do something."

"Yeah well, it's not like I did much."

"Don't be like that, it's better than if you hadn't been there. Now come on, we don't want to get separated from the others in this miasma."

"Yeah, I guess. I'll try to help out a bit more."

"There you go, just do whatever you can do, even if it's just a little. Now let's get going, those people need our help."

"Yeah, you're right. Let's go." Luke said as he walked off with his brother; holding back the words he really wanted to say.

Please be careful.
The 14th of Akzeriuth's mining tunnels was by far largest and deepest of the many mines that had been constructed over the years. As the minerals and metals for which the town was known had slowly become scarcer, the workers had been driven to greater depths in attempt to provide for their families, until they went far too deep, and uncovered something that they weren't able to handle.

The miasma was much thicker in the tunnels, diminishing what little visibility the remaining lights provided. Taking advantage of the weakened state of the workers, several monsters and other creatures had also taken up residence in the lower mines. Despite this, the group continued on forward, determined to rescue the few that were still lost in the toxic fog.

"Over here!" They heard a shout in the distance, cut off by an abrupt fit of hacking and coughing. At the source of the cries they found half a dozen men, some already passed out from the poison, others barely hanging onto their remaining strands of consciousness.

Their group immediately scattered, each going to the side of a different man. Only Luke was still clinging to Asch as he ran to the side of the man who had called out.

"Are you all right?" Asch asked as he helped the man sit up.

"I'm fine, but some of the others…"

"We'll take care of them, but first we need to get you out of here."

"There-" The man burst into another fit of coughing. "There are more of my men, still deeper in the tunnels."

"Okay." Asch summoned a group of Kimlascan guards that had followed them down. "You and your men help these people to the surface and see to it they are looked after. The rest of us are going to split up and search for the rest of the workers."

Wait…split up? Asch's idea caught Luke's attention. It was a very bad idea. But before Luke could protest, an Oracle knight came running down the mine.

"Locrian Sergeant Tear Grants?"

"That's me. What is it?"

"Ma'am, we've located the Seventh Fonstone. We request your presence immediately." The soldier reported.

"They've found the Seventh Fonstone?!" Ion inquired incredulously.

"We believe so."

"But-" Tear looked hesitantly back at the group. She still had responsibilities here.

"Go on Tear." Jade offered. "We can handle things here. They need you to verify its authenticity correct?"

"Yes Tear," Ion agreed, "Please go verify if it is indeed the Seventh Fonstone. We'll be fine."

"Alright, do be careful."

"You as well." Asch nodded to her and she immediately left with the Oracle Knight. "Now, we need to cover as much ground as possible. Jade, you-"
"I don't think splitting up is a good idea." Luke interrupted, earning him a silent look from all the others. "I mean, what if one of us needs help?" Luke explained hesitantly. It wasn't entirely a lie…

"Luke, we don't have time to waste!" Anise protested.

"She's right," Asch confirmed, "The longer this takes, the more miasma the workers will inhale, not to mention us. The miasma is especially thick down here; we don't want to be down here any longer than we have to."

"But…!"

"Luke, don't be so worried, you can do this. I know you can."

'Besides, if you run into anything you can't handle, let me know, and I'll come help you. Okay?" The last reassurance resonated in his mind.


"Then let's not waste anymore time." Jade said, glaring at Luke out of the corner of his eye.

"Yeah let's get going." Asch agreed, "The sooner we can get everyone to safety, the better."

In that regard, Luke couldn't agree more. As he watched Asch slowly vanish in the thickening miasma, he could only hope that everyone would indeed make it back safely.

Luke found the branch of the tunnel down which he was sent, completely empty. As he pushed forward, the miasma steadily grew thicker until he could scarcely see a few feet in front of him. It was also becoming increasingly difficult to breathe. The miasma was competing for space with the air itself and his chest was starting to hurt as his lungs struggled for every bit of oxygen they could get. He doubted he would get much further before he had to turn back.

Luke was about to give up when he saw a vaguely familiar shadow a few feet ahead of him. Relief washed over him, temporarily brushing his worries aside.

"Master Van!" Certainly he would know what to do.

"Luke! There you are. How are things going with your group?"

"Master Van we have a huge problem!" Luke blurted out.

"Slow down Luke, what has you so worked up?"

"Asch is here!"

"Asch is here?" Master Van replied in shock. "What is Asch doing here?"

"He disobeyed Uncle's orders and came anyways. I tried to stop him, but I didn't know how without telling him the truth, and you said not to say anything-"


"I'll show you. This is where I'm going to need your help. Will you come with me?"

"Why don't I go get some of the others and we can all help?" Luke suggested.

"No, this is something only you can do."

"Something only I can do?"

"That's right. The only other that could help is Asch, but the Score says that he will fail, taking Akzeriuth with him as he perishes."

"No…" Luke wouldn't accept that. He wanted, more than anything, to protect Asch, and to protect Akzeriuth.

"So will you come help me save these people?"

Just do whatever you can do.

"Okay, you lead the way."

Van led Luke down a ways before branching off into one of the side tunnels. Luke thought they had reached a dead end until Van pointed out a small doorway in the wall. Wait… a doorway in the wall?

There was no door or seal on it, but the opening in the wall was shaped in an arch, and was far too smooth and precise to be a natural occurrence. Luke hesitantly eyed the opening before taking as deep a breath as he still could amidst the miasma, and stepping in.

When Luke first stepped into the room, the first thing he noticed was the air. It was clean, and felt as fresh as the cool morning breeze had been the day he left Baticul. He took a deep breath, and another as his lungs gratefully took in the oxygen of which they had been deprived for several hours now.

The next think Luke noticed, was the fon machines. They were everywhere and Luke needed a moment to let his eyes adjust to the light that had also been lacking in the rest of the mines. Glowing glyphs danced around the room leading Luke's eyes on a roller coaster of swirls and curves as he attempted to follow them. It was as if he had stepped into a completely different world.

"Master Van, what is this place?"

"This is known as a passage ring." Van provided as he began to make his way forward. Luke followed suit as Van continued his explanation. "They are closely guarded by the Order of Lorelei. Didn't Ion ever tell you of them?"

"No, he didn't."

"Well I suppose that's understandable, it is highly confidential information. Though he is allowed to tell those he trusts to keep it a secret. My apologies, I thought perhaps he might have mentioned them to you."

What did Master Van mean? Did Ion not trust him? It was just like with Asch's kidnapping. Why didn't anyone ever tell him the truth? Didn't they trust him with that information?

"So what exactly are we doing down here?" Luke finally asked as he came upon a huge structure at
the very bottom. It was huge, and Luke was trying to figure out if it was actually a fon machine, or if it was something else altogether. Regardless, it was unlike anything he had ever seen before.

"This," Van replied motioning towards the large object that had the young noble in awe, "is the cause of the miasma. We should be able to get rid of the miasma from here. That way, we can save both the citizens of Akzeriuth, and the town itself."

"Can we really?" It was more than Luke had dared to hope for. "But how? And how exactly am I going to help?"

"Don't worry about a thing. I'll coach you through it. All you have to do is follow my instructions."

"Alright. So what do you want me to do?"

"First come closer, over here." Van positioned Luke right in front of the huge fon machine.

"Now, I need you to close your eyes and calm down. Can you sense those small bits of energy around you?"

"Yes." Luke replied. Of course he could sense them. There were Seventh Fonons everywhere in this place; the entire room was saturated in them.

"Those are Seventh Fonons. I want you to focus, and gather them. They should answer your call."

Luke did as he was told, and just as they always had, the fonons willingly flocked to him, answering his summons. Luke instinctively found himself raising his hands; he needed somewhere to focus on, somewhere to channel that power.

"Good, good." Van continued, impressed at how well everything was proceeding.

Luke maintained his focus, Asch's careful instructions clear in his mind.

Don't lose focus. The slightest mistake can be devastating.

It was then that Luke realized exactly what it was Master Van was coaching him through. He had done this countless times with his brother at his side.

Van wanted him to cause a hyperresonance.

"Where's Luke?" Guy inquired looking around the tunnel entrance.

"I don't know. I sent him down the shortest branch, he should have been back a long time ago." Asch replied.

"No luck over here." Anise said as she approached the group.

"We weren't able to spot Luke in the tunnel he was supposed to be down." Ion added, his attention on the other redhead. "Asch?"

But Asch wasn't listening. Focus. Where was Luke? He was having a hard time locating his wayward sibling as he simultaneously fought the growing panic that something had happened to him. Luke had been on edge the entire time they had been here, and seemed especially apprehensive about going down the tunnels on his own. He was so stupid! Why hadn't he paid
more attention to Luke? Now who knows what might have happened to him!

But then Asch found him. It was faint, but he was deep in the mines. What was he doing there? He was in a room the likes of which Asch had never seen but-

"Asch? Asch!" Natalia raised her voice in attempts to get her fiancée's attention but to no avail. He was completely zoned out. His eyes were open, but he was staring intently at a small pile of pebbles at Jade's feet, and somehow she doubted that was the object of his sudden intense interest.

"That idiot!" Asch yelled all of a sudden before bolting down the tunnel.

"What the hell?" Guy exclaimed.

"Tear what's the matter?" Anise suddenly asked as she noticed the young Oracle Knight running as fast as she could towards them.

"Something's wrong! It's a trap!"

"What? Slow down, you're not making any sense!" Anise protested.

"There was no Seventh Fonstone. When I went to check, a group of Oracle Knights tried to take me away! Van is up to something! And whatever it is, he doesn't want me caught up in it!"

"Let's head after Asch. He could be in danger." Jade said, wasting no time following Asch's trail, which was quickly growing cold.

"What about Luke?" Tear asked as she followed.

"I suspect that is who he ran after."

"But how would he know where to find Luke?" Natalia inquired.

"We can save that for after they're out of harm's way." Jade cut her off in the most concerned and panicked voice they had ever heard out of him.

"You're right, I'm sorry." Natalia apologized as she focused her energy on not falling behind. They would both be okay. They might need a good stern talking too, but they would both be just fine.

They just had to be.

"Master Van? Just what exactly is it you are trying to get me to do?" Luke inquired. He wanted to be sure that Master Van knew exactly what he was doing, and the consequences that might ensue.


"No." Luke stated. He wouldn't do it. At the back of his mind he could sense a sudden concern and fright from Asch, not to mention the feeling he had in his gut telling him that this wasn't the right thing to do.

"I can't set off a hyperresonance here." Luke stated firmly as he slowly and carefully let the Seventh Fonons dissipate. Letting them all go at once could be as dangerous as setting off the hyperresonance itself. Van let go of his grip on Luke's arms but leaned in as he whispered into the
"A tool like you doesn't have a choice. Foolish replica Luke."

All of a sudden, the seventh fonons around him raced out of control. Those he had allowed to dissipate swarmed back bringing with them far more fonons than Luke could control. It was the same as on the ship to Chesedonia! No! He wouldn't set off a hyperresonance here! He couldn't! The entire city rested on these tunnels! Luke fought with all his might to control the sudden swarm of fonons that was engulfing him. Slowly but steadily, he was gaining ground. He could do this; no, he had to do this.

"Such a fool." Van spat as he backed off from the replica. "You think you can fight your fate? This is the sole purpose for which you were created!"

The words struck Luke like an arrow to the heart. The sole purpose? Was everything Van had told him a lie? His future, his hope, every word of encouragement, and every gentle hand that had helped him back up on his feet; he didn't mean a word of it? The fonons were gaining ground. No! He had to focus!

"You are such a failure." Van continued as he enjoyed watching Luke fight the inevitable battle. Someone like him with no experience in such matters didn't stand a chance. "You want to know the truth replica? You were created for the sole purpose of replacing Asch. But being the miserable failure you are, you couldn't even do that properly. Instead you welcomed him home with open arms. But now, you will fix all that. You will die, along with this Score-forsaken city, and Asch will finally join my side to take revenge on the Score that killed his beloved baby brother." Van finished mockingly.

At those last three words, Luke completely lost what hold he had on the situation. The rage, pain and despair that overtook him drew in even more of the fonons that he was already so desperately tying to keep in check. Alone, he didn't stand a chance. There was a brief moment, a split second that froze in time, where the world around him was silent.

And then it went off.

"Something else to try and remember is your feelings." Asch said as he leaned against the cliff. An exhausted Luke had sat down beside him and was using the same cliff face to sit back against. The sun was just starting to crawl down the sky and the gentle mountain breeze swept through the valley while gently pushing the cotton white clouds across the azure sky.

"My feelings?"

"Yeah. Really powerful feelings like anger and hate, and even sadness have a tendency to draw in more fonons. The same thing can happen if you're excited. Normally something like that isn't a big deal, but that's really all it takes to lose control of a hyperresonance."


"Don't worry, like I said before, as long as you practice, and you maintain your focus, you won't have to worry about it."
"Hey Misters." A young boy said from behind them clutching his runaway ball in his hands. "What are you doing over there?"

"We were just practicing something." Luke replied with a smile. "What are you up to all the way out here?"

Akzeriuth.

*Children were running happily in the streets, laughing as Asch playfully chased after them. Luke enthusiastically evaded his brother as well, laughing along with them. The setting sun cast a golden light on them, carefully watching over them all.*

No… It can't…

*Workers cheerfully walked in and out of the mines, chatting about the day's work and what they would have for supper that night. Gloating about their son or daughter's latest achievement, glowering as a young groom describes the beauty and love he has for his soon to be wife.*

It can't… disappear!

Jade chuckling as Anise and Tear stood in shock. Guy yelling at them for switching again as the mining carts continued along their tracks in the background. The city alive with fon machines.

It's going to be gone?

Anise yelling at a mine worker who backed away nervously. His coworkers laughing in the background. The rocks around the tunnel glittering and sparkling in the afternoon sun.

It can't! It won't!

Tear sitting quietly, Jade not far from her side, smiling as she watched the sunset as it faded over the mountains.

But it was. All those bright moments, all those smiling faces, all those dreams and wishes and hopes and opportunities: gone in the blink of an eye. He would never see those children laugh again, he would never quietly watch the sunset with Tear, he would never laugh or smile or play games in Akzeriuth ever again. All the moments he loved were gone forever.

The entire cavern began to shake. Rocks fell from the ceiling as it crumbled, fon machines crashed and shattered as the room fell apart. Luke fell to his knees in disbelief of the destruction that lay before him. He had… he had only wanted to help.

"Well done." Van applauded the fool as he turned to leave.

"Van!" Asch shouted as he dove straight for the commandant, launching himself from the upper level. Van drew his blade and easily fended of Asch's sudden attack sending the boy crashing across the floor and into a pile of debris. Asch crippled under the blow.

"Asch!" Luke screamed in desperation as he tried to reach his brother only to be thrown aside by Van.

"Asch was never supposed to come." Van stated to no one in particular. He snapped his fingers, and almost out of nowhere, two large birds, not unlike the ones Luke had seen Arietta use, appeared at Van's side. One of them gently took Asch in its talons, while Van quickly mounted the second.
"I can't have you dying here," Van looked down at the unconscious redhead, safely secured in the grip of the other bird. "That's what the tool was for." He stated with one last look down at Luke. "This is farewell then, replica. I wish you a quick demise."

Then Van and Asch were gone.

Luke sank down to the floor, the pain and harsh reality slowly creeping its way through his shell-shocked mind. He had nothing. He was nothing. He had been used and thrown away and Luke could no longer hold back the tears that leaked down his face.

Everything, and *everyone* he had wanted to protect…was gone.
Threats

Akzeriuth was falling. Dust and miasma shot into the air as entire sheets of rock split in two. Houses crumbled like dry flowers in the wind, turning to dust, obliterated forever. Even from a distance, the screams could be heard in the streets, panicked people attempting to escape their fate, all in vain as they died along with their forsaken city.

And the man overlooking it all couldn't help but laugh.

Watching from the safety of the nearby mountains, Van stood, two gleaming crimson birds carefully preening their feathers behind him. One freely moved about while the other still held onto its burden that had been carefully moved up on its back.

Asch remained unconscious, which was just as well for the time being, it gave Van some time to enjoy the success of his endeavours. Oh they were still far from nearing completion, but now, after 7 long years of catering to the needs of a couple selfish brats, he could finally set everything into motion.

And they would move.

He still remembered the day seven years ago when Asch had turned him aside to return to his family. It had been his first miscalculation. He had let the boy escape and make his way home, all with the expectations that upon seeing how easily he was replaced would return to the only place he had left, at Van's side.

But things hadn't worked that way at all, that miserable failure had somehow swayed the boy, despite his innate stubbornness, and Asch had slipped through his fingers. Van had lost count of how many times he cursed the replica. Not only had it failed to replace Asch, but it became the thread that tied Asch back into his former life. Time after time he had invited Asch to join him, but he was always shot down; and always for the same reason. The replica.

But that was finally taken care of. Not only had he found a scapegoat to the Score that condemned Asch to death, but he rid himself of the good-for-nothing fool. With the boy none the wiser as to what had happened. It would be so much easier to gain Asch's vital cooperation now. He had a motive, he had a drive. Who wouldn't hate the Score that ripped away the two people for whom he cared for most?

It would be the replica's first success.

The fool had proven to be easier to work with than he had expected. The way it accidentally stumbled onto its abilities on the ship to Chesedonia had worked out especially well. It had been so simple to implant a trigger, just a few choice words, into its mind as it slowly lost consciousness. So easy to turn that on the replica when it thought it had control of the situation, when it thought it could say no.

The amount of control his tool ended up having was something of a surprise, even to him. It had managed to hold on to the point where he had to resort to upsetting the thing to break its focus. Now just how had it managed that? It had absolutely no experience in such things, to have held on so long… Just where had it learned so much in such a short time?

One of the birds behind him squawked, drawing his attention to the dormant redhead.

Of course. Foolish of him to have overlooked that particular fact. The boy had grown unexpectedly
attached to the replica that was supposed to take his place. It wasn't all that much of a surprise he would have taught the fool. He was intelligent, there was no denying that. If given the chance, Asch could become a powerful enemy. He would have to do something about that.

The boy slowly moved his head and groaned. He was starting to come to.

Yes, he would have to do something about that indeed.
No sooner had Tear and the others gotten to the bottom of the mines, did the tunnels begin to shake. Large cracks began to appear in the rock around them, and everyone had to struggle to stay on their feet. Only Ion, who had taken the lead claiming to know where the missing twins may be, somehow managed to maintain his balance and swiftly continued down into Akzeriuth's depths, with everyone else struggling to keep up with his pace.

"Ion, are you sure you know where they are?" Anise called after the Fon Master but got no reply.

"This is a dead end." Jade stated the obvious.

"This way." Ion replied, showing them a hidden arch in the wall. "Hurry, I fear we don't have much time, if any at all."

Everyone quickly slipped through the opening and into the room on the other side. Had it not been such a dire situation, Guy would have been ecstatic at the myriad of ancient technology present in the place, but now wasn't the time for such things. This room seemed to be the source of the collapse. They were already pushing their limits, dodging falling debris as they made their way down towards the center, and things were only getting worse.

"Ion, where are we?" Jade demanded, the severity in his tone making his message clear. It wasn't a question.

"This is a passage ring, built from Dawn Age technology to protect and operate the Sephiroth." Ion replied, not missing a pace as he sidestepped a small boulder that had dislodged from the ceiling.

"What makes you think they'd be here?" Jade questioned as they finally reached the lower platform.

"Luke!" Guy ran to his friend's side, everyone else not far behind.

"Luke what happened here? Luke? Luke!" But Luke wasn't answering. He was sitting on the floor, covered in dirt and debris, staring wide-eyed at a huge empty space enclosed by flickering and dying glyphs, lines drawn down his face where tears had once been. What in all of Auldrant had happened here?

"The passage ring is… gone?" Ion said in shock.

"Ion what will happen with the passage ring gone?" Jade demanded.

"The passage ring produces a pillar that supports this area! Without it, Akzeriuth is going to collapse."

"Oh no! What can we do?!" Anise cried.

"There isn't anything we can do now." Tear interjected. "Quick, everyone gather in close – I'll use a fonic hymn."

"Wait no!" Natalia cried grabbing Tear's sleeve. "What about Asch?! We have to go look for Asch!"

"We don't have time! The entire area's about to fall! If we wait any longer we'll all die!" Tear
argued as Natalia clung to her even more desperately.

"No! You can't just leave him to die!" Natalia screamed. Jade forcefully pulled the princess off Tear as she began to sing. "No! Let go of me!" Natalia fought with all her might, her nails digging painfully into the Colonel's arm, but his grip held firm. "Asch! Asch!" Natalia's hysterical cries, laced in with Tear's sorrowful song, were the last thing anyone heard before everything went black.

Luke slowly cracked his eyes open. He was lying against hard stone. Rocks and debris lay all around him, and miasma once again saturated the air. Where was he?

"He's waking up." Guy noted from where he was sitting on a nearby rock.

Luke slowly sat up and looked around him. Miasma clouded the horizon as far as the eye could see, sitting ominously on an endless purple sea. Pieces of wood and other broken debris lay among the rocks and stuck out of the nearby sludge. It was all that remained of Akzeriuth.

Everything that had happened suddenly crashed back down on Luke.

"Help." The faint cry drew the attention of the rest of the group that had been patiently waiting for Luke to awaken. They all scanned the empty horizon for the source of the plea when a faint movement caught their eye.

Trapped on a piece of wood, was a young boy pinned under the body of an older man. Luke immediately recognized him, it had been the man that he met at the entrance to Tunnel 14, the one who had gone home to help his wife and two boys, and now, his lifeless corpse was dragging his surviving son to his death.


"I don't care! I have to save him!" Luke screamed, as Guy struggled to keep his grip. Luke was completely out of his mind. With a single swift movement, he brought Luke to the ground and pinned him down as Luke flailed under his weight.

"Let go! He's sinking! I have to do something!" Luke continued to flail. It took Guy, Jade and Tear to hold down the frantic noble as he scrambled helplessly under the weight of his companions.

He couldn't move! The little boy choked and screamed as he sunk deeper into the miasma. No he had to do something! He had to- He had to-

The boy's screams silenced as the toxic sludge claimed yet another victim.

Tear got up, and Jade followed. Guy waited a moment before slowly letting up, just in case Luke
decided to try and rescue the poor child from beneath the surface, but Luke didn't move. He remained face down in the mud, his entire body shaking as he sobbed. His white coat was torn and stained, his red hair was covered in mud and streaked crimson with dried blood. He was a mess, physically, mentally and emotionally. What had happened to him?

"What are we going to do? It's only a matter of time before this land sinks as well." Ion pointed out, after a moment's silence.

"I was going to suggest we employ that." Jade said pointing to the other end of the small island on which they were trapped.

"Hey! It's the Tartarus!" Anise exclaimed.

"That's right… wasn't it Legretta and Cantabile's units that were working on it? I suppose it makes sense that it was in Akzeriuth if both of them were hanging around." Guy pitched in.

"Did no one else survive?" Anise asked solemnly.

"I doubt it." Jade replied with an equal degree of seriousness. "Without Tear's hymn, I doubt any of us would have survived either."

"We should get out of here." Tear quietly suggested, "Ion's right, it's only a matter of time before the land we're on sinks as well."

"Luke?" Ion tried in vain to get his attention. Luke was once again oblivious to the rest of the world.

"I don't get it. I've never seen anyone like that before." Anise noted before turning to Guy, "Do you have any idea what-" The rest of her question was cut off as Guy solemnly nodded and pointed behind her where, not far away, Natalia was stumbling around among the rocks and debris.

"Asch? Asch! Can you hear me? Asch! Answer me! Please! Asch?!" Natalia's desperate cries echoed in the emptiness of the Qliphoth. Anise bit her lip as she struggled to keep her emotions in check.

"Let's get those two out of here," Jade suggested, his gaze shifting from the screaming princess to the broken young noble, "Before either of them get any more bright ideas."

"Has he said anything?" Anise inquired. Ion softly shook his head.

"Not a word." They both turned to look at Luke. He was now sitting on the floor of the deck, leaning against the railing, staring aimlessly into the Qliphoth.

"So now what?" Guy inquired, as he returned his attention to the discussion he had been having with Tear, Jade, and Natalia, who had just joined them. The young princess was faring a bit better than Luke was, but under that strong front, she was almost just as broken.

"We've been sailing for quite some time now, and have yet to see anything." Ion pointed out, as he and Anise joined in the conversation.

"Are we really underground?" Natalia inquired.

"We are. This is known as the Qliphoth. Where we came from is known as the Outer Lands, and
floats above the Qliphoth, supported by the Sephiroth." Tear provided.

"That's correct." Ion confirmed, "Two-thousand years ago, Auldrant was enveloped in miasma, and Yulia raised the lands with the Sephiroth to escape destruction."

"That was quite a brilliant plan." Jade admitted.

"Yes, she developed it after reading the Score." Ion continued, "Only those of Maestro rank or higher know of it, as well as those who are born in the Qliphoth."

"So you're from the Qliphoth then Tear?" Anise inquired.

"If you're from the Qliphoth, then there must be someplace that's inhabited." Jade pointed out.

"Yes, Yulia City is northeast of here. If we continue on this heading, we should eventually arrive there." Tear confirmed.

"Good. Now that that's settled, there's one more issue I'd like to resolve." Jade said, his gaze returning to Luke, who still hadn't so much as budged.

"What's that Colonel?"

"I want to know what happened in Akzeriuth." Jade replied, his statement directed at Luke. Luke didn't even acknowledge that anyone was speaking to him.


"I know it must be difficult, but it's very important that we know." Ion tried.

"What about Van? What did my brother do?" Tear gave it a shot. But Luke didn't respond to any of them. He just continued to gaze out into the Qliphoth.

"Tear, we don't know for certain that Dorian General Grants was involved." Jade pointed out. "Aside from the words of the soldiers, we don't have any evidence that he was even in Akzeriuth, much less have been involved with the passage ring."

"No, it's just the sort of thing my brother would do."

"But Tear, where did he go then? Luke was the only one we found in the passage ring." Anise pointed out.

"I'm sorry," Mieu pitched in, hopping down off Luke's shoulder, "I don't know what happened either. I should have stayed with Master."

"It's not your fault Mieu." Ion consoled the little creature, "We had asked you to come with us to help light the torches. Don't blame yourself."

"So in the end, it looks like Luke's the only with any answers." Guy pointed out.

"Enough of this nonsense," Natalia mumbled as she bushed past the blonde who was all too eager to get out of her way. She grabbed Luke's collar and forced him to his feet. "Luke! What happened?!" She yelled, "What happened to Asch? Where is Asch?!"

"Asch is..." Every watched on in shock as Luke finally spoke, though the hysteria in his voice made their hair stand on end. "Asch is... Asch is gone."
"What do you mean Asch is gone?" Natalia yelled. She let go of her hold on Luke's collar and he fell back to the ground, as if it had been the only thing keeping him standing.

"Luke…" Guy watched as Luke sat there, dazed and confused, mumbling something to himself as Natalia yelled at him. He had seen Luke upset before, he had seen Luke devastated before, but he had never ever seen his best friend like this. What could have possibly happened at Akzeriuth that could have made him like this? Then a horrible idea crossed his mind.

"No way…Luke… tell me… Tell me you didn't do this. Tell me this wasn't your fault." Guy managed, earning him a shocked look from everyone else.

"What did you do?!" Natalia renewed her tirade.

"I just…" Everyone fell silent as Luke stood up. "I just wanted to save everyone!" He finally yelled.

Looks of shock, apprehension, and downright disgust swept across the faces of Luke's companions: by defending his actions, he had proven his guilt.

"What were you thinking?! Why did you have to go and do anything?!" Natalia screamed as her voice broke further with every word. "Asch had everything under control! Everything was going just fine!"

"Asch couldn't have done it either-" Luke's statement was cut off as Natalia slapped him across the face.

"Is this some kind of sick competition for you?! I don't even want to look at you right now! Do you have any idea how many people just died?! And now because of you Asch is— Asch is-" Natalia could no longer fight back her emotions and fled into the Tartarus in tears.

"But I was just trying-"

"What were you thinking Luke?" Luke cringed as the reprimand came from his best friend. "How could you possibly think any of this could protect us?! I thought… I thought you of all people would be better than that."

"But that's not-"

"Don't make excuses." Tear harshly cut him off.

"Aren't we being unfair?" Ion hesitantly intervened. "We haven't given Luke a chance to explain his side of the story."

"Don't bother Ion. He can explain all he wants, but it's not going to bring any of those people back to life." Anise spat. "I don't care what he says, it won't change the fact he mass murdered a whole city. Over what? Some stupid inferiority complex with his brother."

"But I wanted to protect them…" Luke cried desperately, his voice edging on insanity, "I was trying to protect Asch!"

"Don't you get it?!" Tear snapped, "Asch is dead! Asch is dead because of you! Now he's gone because you had to be the hero and try to save everyone all on your own! It doesn't matter what you meant to do! It doesn't change what you did do!"

Luke's eyes opened wide in shock, and the pain that her harsh words inflicted on him was as
obvious as his trembling. But in spite of all that, for the first time, Tear didn't regret her words.

"But it wasn't… I didn't…" Luke muttered.

"Colonel, where are you going?" Anise inquired as Jade began to make his way back inside.

"I'm returning to the bridge, I've had enough of this." Jade replied curtly.

"Allow me to join you." Tear's voice came out venomous and her harsh gaze never left Luke.

"Yeah us too, I don't even want to be around him anymore." Anise agreed as she, Ion and Guy followed Jade and Tear inside.

"Luke…" Guy turned back for a moment, "No, never mind, It looks like I may have thought too much of you after all." And the last of Luke's friends, abandoned him.

"Why…." Luke mumbled "Why won't anyone believe me? Why won't anyone listen to me?" He yelled into the emptiness of the Qliphoth.

Wait, someone would understand. Asch would understand, Asch always understood. Asch would listen to him, and understand, and even if he yelled at him, it would always be because he understood and Luke still deserved it.

'Asch?'

Luke waited a moment.

'Asch?'

Again silence. But it wasn't the usual silence like when Asch was thinking, or just plain ignoring him; it was an empty, echoing silence. Asch simply wasn't there.

'Asch…where are you?' Tears slowly began to leak down his face. 'I…I need you. You said if I ever needed help…to just call and you'd come help me. Please…I… I don't know what to do anymore…'

The emptiness that followed his desperate plea wrought on him even more pain than his friend's accusations had. Luke completely broke down, sinking to the floor sobbing. Because thousands of lives had just been lost, lost because of him; because everything he had been hoping for had crashed down around him; because the people he cared about had just abandoned him, and maybe because for the first time in his life, he was truly alone.

"Master…" Mieu approached Luke and gently set one of his paws on his master's side. Luke continued to cry, oblivious to the young cheagle's presence. "I know I can't replace your brother…" The small creature began as he climbed up onto the young noble's lap, "but maybe…if I stay here with you…I can help some of the pain go away." He finished as he quietly curled up in Luke's lap.

It was all he could do for him. Maybe this way, at least, he wouldn't be completely alone.
Finding Reality

Luke's steps echoed as he followed behind everyone. No one was waiting for him to catch up; no one was even looking over their shoulder to see if he was still following. They didn't care. Nobody did.

Yulia City was a dead city. Despite the myriad of glowing lights and abundance of Dawn Age technology, the city's purple hues drowned it in the miasma its barriers kept at bay. Save for his former companions a few steps ahead of him, there wasn't a person to found anywhere. So Luke just continued to walk, entranced by the steady echo of his own footsteps.

Maybe no one lived here, or maybe they had all died, murdered by the poisonous fog that lay just beyond the city's boundaries, just like Akzeriuth. *Just like you how you killed them.* No. No! He didn't want to kill them! He *didn't* kill them! All that blood couldn't be on his hands… no… it just couldn't be. It wasn't… He wanted to protect them! He *had* to protect them!

Luke's erratic thoughts were cut off by the sound of ruffling feathers and a soft thump followed by footsteps. Luke slowly glanced over his shoulder to identify the source of the noise. His heart jumped and he flew around when his eyes caught a glimpse of a very familiar crimson.

Asch's emerald eyes were hard and cold as he slowly approached his counterpart, but his harsh mood didn't get through to Luke. Rather, Luke's eyes lit up and he ecstatically made his way towards his sibling. Finally…

But before Luke even had the chance to react, Asch had his blade drawn and pointed straight at him. He froze on the spot, the tip of his sibling's sword dancing dangerously close to his face. Luke began to tremble as he took a hesitant step back, then another, and another. Shaken, he continued to move away as feelings of complete shock and defeat crashed over him.

No… Asch was - Asch was supposed to understand. Asch was supposed to be the one to listen to him… Of course. This wasn't Asch… It couldn't be Asch. Asch would never… this was just some figment of his imagination, a trick of his mind. Yeah… that was it. Then in that case… all he had to do was-

Luke drew his own sword and in a heartbeat was charging his reflection. Rage, pain and desperation coursed through every vein of his body, and it was all because of this person before him. Their blades met and he threw all his racing feelings behind it. Without even missing a beat, Asch took his sword in a single hand and threw Luke aside like a rag doll.

With the back of his hand, Luke brushed away the blood that ran down his face. He pulled himself to his feet, his left arm trembling in anger to the point where he almost dropped his sword. His opponent didn't make a move, standing calmly, watching him, his blade loosely dangling in his right hand, waiting for him to move.

Luke clutched his own sword so hard his fists turned white, his aberrant mind unable to follow any coherent thoughts. Everything was gone. Everyone was gone. No! They weren't gone! He had to protect them! Raising his blade, he assaulted his sibling only to be blocked without any trouble at all.

'What's the matter Luke? I thought you were trying to kill me!' Asch's mocking voice echoed in Luke's racing mind.
'Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!' Luke screamed back as he placed blow after blow only to be easily fended off.

'Why did you do it? Why did you kill all those people?'

'I didn't! I didn't kill them!' Luke swung his sword down on his original.

'You're never going to beat me,' Asch easily blocked Luke's attack, 'until you learn to control those emotions of yours!'

Asch struck and Luke was sent skidding across the ground. Luke trembled as he pulled himself to his knees, and then to his feet. He wouldn't lose, not now, not ever. He still had- he still had to protect them.

'Don't be a fool.' Asch stated solemnly as he fended of Luke's ensuing onslaught. 'There's no one left to protect. They're all gone!'

'No! No they're not!' Luke cried attempting to force his statements into reality with every swing.

'They're dead Luke! And they aren't coming back!'

No it wasn't true… It couldn't be true- He wouldn't let it be true! Luke asserted every bit of his anger, his desperation, and even his loneliness, as he struck again and again. Make it go away. Just make it go away and it won't hurt anymore. Make him go away and it won't be painful anymore. He just had to make them all go away.

'Do you think if you beat me they'll come back? That all this will just disappear?'

'Stop it. Don't- Leave me alone!'

'No Luke. I will not leave you alone. Not until you tell me what you did!'

'I didn't do anything!'

'You're lying!'

Asch had yet to place his other hand on his blade. He effortlessly parried Luke's increasingly desperate attacks, and easily tossed him aside. Looking down on his scrambling sibling, he relentlessly dominated the fight.

'Why didn't you try and protect them?' Asch demanded.

'I did! I did try to protect them!'  

'Then what were you protecting them from?'

'From the miasma! They were all going to die! I had to get rid of it!'

'And how were you going to get rid of it?'

'I just had to go down to the passage ring. There were Seventh Fonons everywhere-'

'Why the hell did you need Seventh Fonons?!'

'-but there were too many.' Luke continued to ramble in desperation, his attacks picking up their pace, completely oblivious to Asch's demand. 'So many fonons… they were everywhere, and they
kept coming and coming and coming and they wouldn't go away! They wouldn't leave me alone! I couldn't- and I... I...'

Luke's onslaught suddenly stopped. His shoulders sagged and a laugh escaped him that made Asch's hair stand on end, drowned as it was in sorrow and tinged with insanity.

'They're all gone.' Luke finally admitted when his disturbed laughter had faded away. 'I was the one who killed them all. I wanted to save them but they're dead, and it's all my fault.'

'You don't understand anything do you?'

'Understand?' Luke's attacks began again with a renewed intensity only to be effortlessly blocked by Asch. 'I don't understand?! How could you understand? How could someone like you possibly understand?! You have a life! You have a future that no one can take away! How could you possibly know what it's like to have all that ripped away from you?!!'

'You think I don't know what it's like to lose everything important to me?'

'Of course not! People look up to you and admire you! They always have! Everybody loves you and trusts you and worries about you when you're gone! It's always been that way, even when we were kids! You were always more important! No one cares about me! They use me until I'm useless and they throw me away like a piece of garbage! So tell me-' Luke eyes filled with tears as his rampant onslaught continued, 'tell me how you could possibly understand!'

'If I can't understand, then make me understand! Tell me why you did it!' Asch placed his other hand on his sword and in a single powerful swing he met Luke's strike and sent him crashing down onto the cold stone beneath him, staining it with the blood of his steadily accumulating injuries.

If Luke had been a mess before, it was nothing compared to how he looked now. His once pristine white coat was tattered and torn, covered in splotches of mud and dirt. Red stained the sleeves and waist where blood continued to trickle from the countless injuries that he now wore. He was beaten and bruised from having been thrown around and the way he fought to keep his hand steady betrayed his steadily weakening will. He was having trouble getting back up; this fight wouldn't last much longer.

'You're just like everyone else.' Luke finally managed once he had pulled himself to his knees. Blood and sweat camouflaging the tears that hit the ground alongside them. 'I get it now. You don't believe me. You don't trust me. No one ever did... because no one has ever told me the truth. You never told me about your kidnapping you know... I had to hear it from Van! And not just you, Ion never told me about the passage rings, or the Sephiroth, or anything. Then even Master Van! Everything he- Everything...' Luke wiped away his tears as he stood up. 'So now... I have nothing left to lose.'

Luke renewed his assault, but it was different then before. The anger and the hard feelings that had previously driven him were all but gone, leaving a shell of pain and remorse. True to his words, Luke put everything he had left into his attacks. There was no thought out strategies, no complex patterns in his movement, he simply attacked; over and over, becoming more wild and reckless with every swing. At this rate, he was going to end up hurting himself.

'I see now.' In a single fluid motion, Asch disarmed Luke sending his sword skidding across stone, and without leaving Luke any time to react, landed a solid punch across his face that sent him crashing to the ground. Asch then placed his sword neatly between Luke's eyes. Luke could only weakly look back up at his original; he no longer had the strength to get up.
Asch calmly watched Luke as the tense silence enveloped them both. In spite of the mess Luke appeared to be, Asch was finally starting to feel a bit relieved. When he had first arrived, he could sense Luke's erratic thoughts, bordering so very dangerously on the edge of insanity. It scared him. It had scared him far more than he'd care to admit, and he had been willing to do anything to bring Luke back. He just couldn't lose Luke, not to this, not to any of Van's atrocities.

But now Luke seemed okay. He was still devastated, and more upset than Asch could ever describe, and though it was going to be a long and hard journey, he would eventually get better. All the anger and resentment, and even a bit of the loneliness had faded away. He had finally accepted what had happened, and as painful and difficult as that was; he could finally start to deal with it. And then someday, he would smile again.

'I have nothing left anymore.' Luke brokenly admitted as he struggled to hang onto his consciousness. 'Everyone's left. There's no one who would care about me.'

'You're wrong.' Luke confusedly looked up at his older brother and saw a sad smile on his face. Everything else around them dissolved and Luke watched as Asch lowered his blade and extended his hand.

'Come with me, and I'll prove it to you.'

Luke hesitantly reached up, afraid that at the last second it might all disappear. His arm was heavy, and it dragged him down, but he wouldn't let it beat him. He desperately needed to reach out, to know that someone still cared. He took Asch's hand and as soon as he did, he felt a suffusing warmth sweep over him. Leaving that heaviness and suffering behind, Luke carefully allowed Asch to pull him up.

All the pain and sorrow was gone, if only for that brief moment, and the strangest feeling washed over him. He came to the realization that a part of him was still on the ground, lying under the intense scrutiny of Asch's blade.

'What's going on?'

'Relax.' Asch's reassuring voice infused him with comforting warmth. Luke closed his eyes. 'Just trust me. I won't let anything happen to you.' Luke quietly accepted Asch's words for what they were and allowed his consciousness to rest.

Everything had gone wrong, and because he had messed up, countless people died. But the burden wasn't as heavy anymore.

At least he had been able to protect one of them.
Memories

The early spring breeze gently blew across an open field. The bright spring blossoms softly swayed in the wind, basking in the light of the sun that shone down from the endless blue sky. In the center of the field sat two children, no more than seven. The boy was dressed in white and had crimson hair that was being gently tossed around in the wind, and seated among the flowers, a young girl with golden hair and an azure dress looked happily up at him.

"Someday, when we're grown up, let's change this country. Change it so that no one has to be poor. Change it so that war never happens. Let's work to change our country. For the rest of our lives." The boy smiled as the young girl's face lit up.

"Yes, someday we shall wed and together we'll make this country a wonderful place!" She replied with a smile. She took a ring that she had made out of the flowers and placed it on the boy's head. The white and yellow blossoms stood out against the boy's deep red hair, unlike the matching one on her own head.

"Together." He replied.

"Together." She took his hands. "It's a promise."

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'What is this?'

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"Luke! To have snuck out like that is bad enough, but to have taken Natalia with you?" The red-haired boy cringed as his father reprimanded him.

"You are to be this nation's ruler. For that you will need to learn responsibility, to have the capacity to lead the people."

"You don't have to tell me, I know that." The boy replied.

"We know you do sweetheart." The boy's mother spoke up, "but you need to try and be more careful, you're the only one we have, there's no one other than you who can do this."

"I'm sorry, I'll try not to disappoint you."

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'Where am I?'

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The young boy sat alone in a room of the manor, gazing quietly out the window into the clear summer sky. The room was empty, as was the courtyard he was observing. He sat alone allowing his sorrows to grow in the silence.

"If it's you Luke, you'll make a wonderful king," The boy turned around to see his teacher, "I can guarantee you that." The boy smiled gratefully as his inconsequential concerns were swept away.

"Master Van..."
"You're capable of many, much greater things." He continued, "because you are the chosen one."

"Thank you…"

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'What is all this?'

'My memories.' Asch's simple response came rather unexpectedly as Luke watched many scenes play out before him.

'But why am I seeing your memories?'

'You wanted to know didn't you? You wanted to know the truth.'

'Well yeah…'

Luke suddenly found himself back at home. The moonlight softly filtered in through the window and lit the room, providing Luke with enough light to look around. It was one of the guest rooms back at the manor, the one at the northern edge of the courtyard, but it wasn't how Luke remembered it. Rather than the flowery bed spread and neatly kept end tables, there were shelves of books and toys. Training swords neatly lined the wall and the closet was full of clothes all carefully hung up and ready for their owner to pick them out. A dark blue blanket covered the bed in which slept a young red haired boy.

Luke watched Asch sleep, or 'Luke' rather; he couldn't be any more then ten. So this had been Asch's room when he was young, that might explain why it seemed vaguely familiar. If it had been Asch's room, then it had also been his for a time. But since Luke had moved to his current room, no one else had claimed it, and it had become a guest room.

A soft knock came at the door, and Asch sat up. Luke instinctively ducked out of sight at the foot of the bed. Wait… what was he hiding for? This was a memory, that's what Asch had said. Did he even exist here? Luke hesitantly peeked up from the foot of the bed and found himself eye to eye with his future sibling. But Asch didn't make any indication of having seen him; rather he sleepily blinked and rubbed his eyes before replying.

"Who is it?"

So Luke couldn't be seen, he was just an observer. Someone watching this chain of events play out before him but not able to do anything about them. They had happened a long time ago after all. But just what was he watching?

"I apologize for waking you so late Master Luke," the voice came through the door. It was Guy! His voice was quieter, and a bit higher pitched, but Luke still recognized it.

"You can come in; I can barely hear you out there." Asch replied with a yawn. The door opened, and just as Luke had guessed, a fourteen year-old Guy walked in.

"My apologies, but your presence is requested in the entrance hall." Guy said once he had entered.

"So late? What's going on?"

"Nothing to concern yourself about, but I was asked to fetch you despite how late it is." Guy
replied stiffly. What was with him? The Guy Luke knew wasn't anything like that.

"Alright, just give me a moment."

"I'll await you outside." Guy acknowledged before stepping out the door.

Asch quickly changed out of his pyjamas and threw on a pair of shorts and a shirt. It was a bit cold out for such a light outfit, but he wouldn't be out long before he could return to the comforting warmth of his bed.

"So what's going on?" Asch inquired of Guy as they made their way across the courtyard.

"I wasn't given any details on the matter."

"Well you must know something, what did it look like? Is there a guest?"

"I don't know." Guy stopped before opening the door, causing Asch to almost trip over his feet.

"Guy, what's the matt-" But before he could finish his question, someone with a strong grip grabbed him, holding him still with one arm, while the other pressed a wet cloth against his mouth. Asch struggled but wasn't able to budge, his eyes pleading with Guy to help him. He couldn't breathe!

Forgetting where he was, Luke pounced on Van who he could clearly see holding Asch and pressing the drug-soaked rag against his brother's mouth. But this wasn't real, or at least this wasn't his reality, and he passed right through the man, landing in a heap on the ground.

"Guy help him!" Luke yelled at the blonde, despite the fact that he knew full well that Guy couldn't hear him. Why wasn't Guy helping? Why wasn't he even putting up a fuss? Even if he didn't stand a chance against Van, he could still make enough of a ruckus to attract some attention. But he didn't. Guy simply stood, watching the struggling boy as the drug took effect and he slowly lost consciousness, still silently reaching out to the person he had trusted for help.

No way, Luke watched on in horror as Asch weakened. Guy wasn't involved in this. He couldn't be... Guy would never do anything like that. Luke's surroundings began to fade to darkness as Asch lost consciousness. It was his memory after all, the spaces he hadn't seen and things he didn't know, couldn't be filled in. But as everything around him melted away, Luke caught a glimpse into the empty entrance hall. His heart sank as he noticed that there was no one there, and nothing going on. As Asch's last traces of consciousness faded, Luke had one final realization.

*No wonder Asch doesn't trust Guy.*

Luke had no idea how long he had spent in the darkness before Asch awoke. But when he finally did, the surroundings were once again a place Luke was familiar with. This time they were in the basement of Choral Castle. Asch sat up and held his spinning head, the effects of the drug still not completely worn off. He was sitting in the small cell that Asch had shown Luke on their previous trip, easily identifiable by the jagged bars and harsh surroundings.

Suddenly realizing what was going on, Asch ran up to the bars and tried to pull them out, but they were solidly implanted in the rock, and didn't budge. He looked out from his prison, trying to spot
someone, anyone, but there wasn't anyone else around. He shivered from the cold and the fact that he had been lying on wet rock. He too recognized where he was, but he didn't remember any of those strange machines being there before.

Asch turned around to try and find a place to sit in his cell and wait for someone to come. Certainly someone would come, he was sure they must be looking for him right about now. He had to find a way to get out and get back home. Everyone must be worried.

It was then that he noticed the food. Someone had left him a tray with something to eat and a container full of water. On the tray was some bread and some fruit that made Asch's stomach rumble. He hadn't realized how hungry he was.

After a moment's inspection, he decided the food wasn't poisoned and began to eat, but as he did, he grew steadily tired. It wasn't until he was almost done that he finally realized it. The drug was in the food! But it was far too late, and he was already slipping back into the realm of unconsciousness.

Time passed and Asch spent most of it in a haze of unconsciousness and vague consciousness. Even when he was awake, he couldn't manage to string a proper chain of thought together. He couldn't think straight, and it frustrated him beyond belief. He couldn't stay here. It was cold, and he wanted to go home. Twice he had tried not eating, but after a couple days, though his mind had cleared, he barely had the strength to move much less break out. Then as soon as he was discovered, he'd be force-fed, and the haze would return.

Luke quietly sat beside his future sibling. It tore him apart to see Asch like this, so completely helpless. He was so desperate to get home and frustrated with his own lack of strength. Even though Luke knew this was nothing more than a memory, he placed a comforting arm around the boy. As expected, the young Asch remained completely oblivious to his presence, and Luke would have given anything for the chance to change all this. To make all the pain and sadness go away. But he couldn't, all he could do was sit in the cell and try, in vain, to comfort the sobbing ten-year old.

Not long after that, the pain began. Every day, Asch was forcefully hauled from his cell, and bound to a strange machine he didn't recognize. It was a bizarre device with green lights, and it was what brought the pain. Time and time again it was inflicted on him, until he had reached his limits, at which point he was thrown back in his cell, to have the entire process repeated later once he'd recovered. It was cold, he wanted to go home. He just, he just wanted to go home. Everyone was waiting, he had to get home. They needed him, he just had to get home. As soon as he got home, all the pain, everything, it would all go away.

Time itself became completely inconsequential. There was no sense of night or day, even if his mind would have been lucid enough to notice. Even Luke couldn't make out how much time had passed. His perception of their surroundings was affected by how Asch had seen them after all. Everything that happened, the pain, the lights, the machines, it all blended together into a single existence. Asch hated it. It was cold, it hurt, and he just wanted to go home. Everyone must be worried; everyone must be looking for him. They needed him; he just had to get home.

Then suddenly something stood out from the torturous cycle. When he was hauled out of his cell and bound to the machine, the pain came as expected, but then a strange warmth appeared beside him. Asch, and subsequently the observing Luke, couldn't identify what it was… but it was a wonderful warm feeling that made all of the pain and all the sadness go away, even if just for a
brief moment. Asch desperately reached out to that warmth, but as soon as he did, it disappeared, leaving nothing but the cold to which he had become accustomed in its wake.

Then that too became a part of the endless cycle. Every time the same comforting, suffusing warmth would appear beside him, and every time he would reach out to it. It could make all the pain go away, and then maybe, he could finally go home. But every time, it would always vanish, slipping through his fingers as it dissipated.

Maybe he could never reach it. Perhaps such happiness and appeasement was not meant for him. Perhaps he would never again make it home. But what would happen then? Mother would be completely devastated, and surely Father would be upset as well. Then what about Natalia? He had made her that promise, and she would never forgive him for breaking it. He wanted to go home… but how? He had begun to believe that if he could reach that warmth, then everything would be better. Then it would all go away. But even that seemed out of his reach.

Luke didn't want to be here anymore. It was too much. He couldn't stand to see Asch like this. It was just too cruel. His hatred for the man who had put him through all this grew exponentially with every painful and torturous moment that Asch went through, and there were many of them.

Luke had no idea how long all this had gone on, but it had been long enough to break whatever strength and will Asch had left. His hope was nothing more than a flickering flame, desperately clinging to a dream of home and of returning to all those he loved; of fulfilling his responsibility to his country and his family. It was all he had left to hold onto.

It began the same as any other time. Asch was hauled from his cell, offering far less resistance then he had the first time it had occurred. Again he was strapped to the strange machine with the green lights, and once again the strange warmth appeared beside him. But for the first time, he didn't reach out. He wouldn't be able to handle it if it were to disappear again. It was so bizarre, why did it upset him so every time this strange feeling went away? But without even realizing it, that feeling, that strength, had become his hope, and he couldn't stand losing it again. Maybe if he didn't reach out, it wouldn't go away.

Don't be afraid my child.

The deep voice softly resounded in his mind, coming from everywhere and nowhere all at the same time. Asch had no idea what it was, but, something about it made him feel safe. It brought with it a strength and a hope that he had long lost somewhere along the way. Asch hesitantly reached out again.

As long as I am able… I will watch over you.

Asch didn't know what the warmth would feel like, and he realized he hadn't given any thought to what it might be. But as he carefully held onto the hand of the boy next to him, he felt at peace for the first time since he had been taken away. And for that moment everything else became inconsequential.

Both of you.

"That's it!" A cry came from across the room. "It's stable! We've finally created a stable one!"

A looming shadow came over Asch, and the warmth beside him was ripped away. Asch struggled and fought but in spite of his efforts only ended up back in his cell.
Asch desperately pulled at the bars, fighting to get free. He didn't even know why he was fighting so hard, but something in him was reaching out for what had just been ripped away from him. Something inside of him had been relit, and he knew he needed to get out and away from here. He had to get back home.

After that, no one came to take Asch from his cell. The warmth that Asch had found that day never returned, nor did the strange voice. There wasn't anymore pain and his cell wasn't frequented as often as it had been. Even though he continued to eat what he was given, the haze began to lift and Asch's mind was no longer a clutter of unconnected ideas. Things became perceptible and the harshness of the environment that Asch had been living in became all the more clear, and it made Luke sick.

Time after time Van would pass by the cell, and every time it was always the same scene that played out.

"Master Van! Why?! Let me out! Please Master Van!" Asch flailed, fighting against his imprisonment.

"I'm sorry Luke, but for the sake of the world, your power is needed."

"No! I'm to be the ruler of Kimlasca, I'm needed back home! Please let me go!"

"Give it up Luke. I've already made a replacement for you. It's useless for you to return to the mansion, you'll no longer be needed." Luke's stomach lurched as soon as Van said the word 'replacement'. He couldn't possibly mean…

"You're lying!"

"Even if it isn't you it's fine."

"No! It's not true!"

"They don't need you."

"Shut up! It's a lie! It can't be true!" Asch screamed as he pointlessly pounded the bars. Tears of anger streamed down his cheeks as Van simply walked away. Once he was gone, Asch would always sit at the back of the cell and sob until he fell asleep.

The next thing Luke knew, he was back at the manor. This time it was daytime, about mid-afternoon judging by the height of the sun. There was a soft breeze blowing through the yard of the mansion soft, cotton clouds drifted across the blue sky.

Luke quickly found Asch standing under a tree watching something that was behind him. Seeing the look on Asch's face, Luke almost didn't want to turn around. Asch was beaten and bruised, some of his wounds still bleeding as he used an arm to prop himself up. The clothes he had on were different than the ones he had been wearing at Choral Castle, but they weren't in much better condition. They were dirty and torn, and Luke didn't want to know what Asch had been through anymore than he wanted to know what was behind him that was causing Asch so much pain. He had been through so much just to get home. What could it be that would have him upset now that
he had finally made it? He was finally home. Despite Luke's own apprehension, his curiosity got the better of him, and he slowly turned around.

That was when Luke first saw himself.

Dressed in Asch's clothes, he was stumbling around as everyone watched on, not a care in the world. Luke's heart stopped. Mother was smiling, the servants were happily playing with him and Natalia wasn't far off playing among the flowers. No one seemed to notice that anything was wrong. Amnesia they called it, caused by the trauma of the kidnapping. He was their Luke and they were happy to have him back.

Guy calmly watched on as the young replica chased a butterfly around the yard. Luke watched his best friend. He knew. Guy knew that the boy before them wasn't really Luke, that he was a replacement. But he stayed silent and accepted it all. Why? What connection did Guy have to Van?

"Luke!" Natalia's voice drew Luke's attention. The young princess was standing over his younger self with her hands on her hips, one of them carefully holding a ring of flowers she had laced together. "Where have you been? I've been looking everywhere for you!" She said with a smile, placing the ring of flowers on his head.

Luke's heart stopped as he hesitantly turned around to see Asch, who was now completely broken, tears streaming down his face. Luke knew better than anyone what those flowers meant.

How? How did Asch not hate him? Even he hated himself right now. After everything that Asch had been through, all that time, he thought only of coming home, to fulfill his responsibilities and to keep everyone from worrying. Now, not one of them cared that he was gone.

A sudden movement and Luke found himself ducking behind a tree. No wait...he wasn't, Asch was. Luke couldn't look around anymore and realized he was now seeing things from Asch's perspective. He saw his younger self peek around the tree and move to follow. The boy tripped, and Asch instinctively caught him. Their eyes met. It was like looking into a mirror.

Luke could feel Asch's racing emotions as he watched his replacement, still unsteady on his feet. In its own way, this was far worse than all the pain he had endured since his kidnapping and Asch was fighting to keep his emotions in check.

Luke held his breath, afraid of what might happen next. He hoped beyond all hope that his younger self wouldn't do anything stupid, that he wouldn't cause Asch anymore pain. He just wouldn't be able to live with himself if he did.

But in spite of all the things Luke feared he might do, or rather, that he might have done, the young boy just curiously watched Asch as if he was another new addition to his environment. After a moment's contemplation, he took the ring of flowers and placed them on Asch's head, and in that moment, Luke could feel Asch lose what little control he had left over his emotions.

Luke had to fight back his own emotions, though he wasn't having much more success than the boy whose story he was watching. It had never crossed his mind just what Asch had been through, or just how painful the story of his own birth might be. He had been so upset at being left out of the loop that he hadn't stopped to think about how hard it might be on Asch to tell it. He had just been selfish, and it outright disgusted him.

Suddenly, the young Luke took Asch into a gentle embrace, catching both Asch and the observing Luke by surprise. Asch stood in shock for a moment before hesitantly returning the gesture. He clutched his replica as he sobbed and time froze for that moment. Luke then noticed a realization
that suddenly dawned on Asch.

It was the warmth that had made all the pain and sadness go away. The same feeling that had given him strength when he thought he had lost everything. He had found it again.

And when he reached out, it didn't go away.

_He had finally found his hope._

Luke woke up. The memories and scenes were gone and darkness now surrounded him. Where…?

'You done tromping around in my memories?' Asch's voice resonated within him.


'I was joking Luke.' Asch chuckled.

'I'm sorry.' Luke replied quietly.

'What for?'

'For…for everything. For everything I put you through… for all of it. I'm… sorry.'

'Hey. I didn't show you that so you could feel guilty about it. None of that is your fault.'

'But if it wasn't for me-'

'Luke if it wasn't for you, Score knows where I'd be right now. I'd probably have gone back with Van and ended up in the Oracle Knights or something.'

'With Van?' Luke replied in shock. 'After all that? You would have gone to Van? Why?'

'I was only 10. I wouldn't have had anywhere else to go.'

'But still…'

'There's no point in getting worked up over what didn't happen. The point is I don't blame you for anything so there will be no blaming yourself.'

'Is that why you never told me?' Luke inquired hesitantly.

'Partially. Also partially because reliving it…isn't easy.'

'I'm sorry for making you go through it all again.'

'Luke you can stop apologizing for everything.' Asch chuckled. 'It's okay; I would have had to tell you eventually. It was actually easier this way.' Both of them were quiet for awhile.

'Asch, can I ask you something?' Luke finally spoke up.

'What is it?'

'Why did you stay?' The question caught Asch off guard and silence fell over them both.
'I guess because…there was still someone there who needed me.' He finally replied. Again silence fell over the siblings. Asch could feel Luke deeply contemplating everything he now knew.

'So where am I anyways?' Luke finally asked, serving both as a change of topic and as a way to qualm his steadily growing curiosity.

'I took your consciousness into me.'

'So…I'm inside your head?' Luke inquired confusedly.

'Basically, yeah.'


'Right. Don't worry; you're asleep in the bed on the other side of the room. Of course, you won't wake up until your consciousness returns to your body though.'

'In bed? Where are we anyways?'

'That's a long story.'

'Well I'm not going anywhere.' Luke offered.

'Yeah well I plan on going back to sleep at some point tonight.' Asch shot back as he rolled over in bed and further buried his head in his pillow. Luke now had a broader sense of where he was and he could feel Asch shuffling around under the blanket trying to get comfortable. It was the strangest feeling. They weren't his movements, but they felt no different than if he had moved himself. That would take some getting used to.

'Well can you give me the short version?' Luke eventually asked.

'Tear's house.'


'That would require the long version.' Asch muttered.

'Fine, but I want to hear it in the morning. Or I guess, you could just tell me in the morning. I'll probably have to go back to my own body.'

'Eventually. But I want you to stay with me for awhile. There's still something I have to show you.'

'What's that?'

'In spite of what you think, there are people who do care about you, some more so than they care about me.'

'I don't know about that anymore.'

'What would make you think that?' Asch inquired. He knew they couldn't have been easy on Luke after Akzeriuth, if only from the state Luke had been in when he had found him. But he had no idea what had exactly gone on.

Luke was silent, that was a memory he wasn't ready to relive just yet.

'You'll see. If no one else, Guy will be worried sick about you.'
'Guy…' Luke trailed off. 'I didn't know about what he did. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gotten mad at you for not trusting him. I guess I never stopped to think that there might actually be a reason…'

'What did I say about the apologizing?' Asch snapped.

'But-

Asch couldn't help but laugh sleepily at how quickly Luke became defensive, though he quickly stifled it when Luke didn't follow suit, choosing to get embarrassed instead. 'Seriously, stop apologizing. You couldn't have known.'

'Do you really think he has something to do with Van?' Luke asked.

'Maybe, maybe not. But Luke, don't distrust him over what I showed you. There's a good reason I never told you why I don't trust Guy. I don't believe that he would ever try to hurt you.' Asch replied. He held back his theory that Guy's true colours may yet show themselves now that Van had started to put his plans into motion, but what he said was still held true. In the seven years since Luke had been born, Asch had seen just how important Luke was to the blond. He valued Luke as a friend as much as his little brother did the same. 'I may not be able to fully trust him yet, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't.'

'Okay.'

'More importantly, our first priority should be figuring out what it is Van's trying to do.'


'Luke… I know this is going to be hard for you. But I need you to tell me exactly what happened in Akzeriuth.'
"Asch?" Luke tugged at the 12 year old's sleeve.

"What is it Luke?" Asch did his best not to look annoyed at being distracted from the book he had been reading. Luke looked upset.

"What's a replica?"

"Why do you ask that all of a sudden?"

"Well...you said that I'm a replica, and everyone else calls me a replica and I don't understand. Does it mean that I'm fake?" Luke asked, tears welling up in his eyes.

"What are you talking about? Of course you're real, you're standing right here."

"But then why-" Luke let out a sob.

Asch stood up and pulled him in to a soft embrace.

"It just means you were born different than other people." Asch told him gently as Luke continued to sob in his arms. "No matter what anyone else tells you, you're still my little brother - and that's the only thing that matters."

Asch sat down on the bed overlooking his unconscious sibling. He gently brushed a few stray hairs out of Luke's eyes and frowned as his hand came upon the dry blood that stained the side of Luke's face. He had been so tired the night before that he had hauled the cot up from the storage room and promptly fallen asleep. He regretted not having taken the time to at least properly bandage Luke up.

"Will Master be okay?" Mieu hesitantly hopped up on the bed and looked up at Asch.

"He'll be fine after he gets some rest. He's had a hard time lately." Asch quietly replied as he examined the extent of Luke's injuries.

"That's true." Mieu replied. "Everyone was really mad at him too."

"They were..." Asch trailed off as he fought against his growing anger. It wouldn't do to wake Luke, whose consciousness was quietly resting in the back of his mind. He had gotten the full account on recent events from Luke the night before, from Van's manipulations, to what everyone had said on the Tartarus. Asch got the impression that Luke hadn't intended to tell him that last part, but as he had told the story, everything had just come out, and despite Asch's best attempts to comfort him, he had cried himself to sleep. "Hey Mieu," Asch distracted himself from that train of thought; "do you think you could do me a favour?"

"Sure!" The little cheagle's ears flapped in excitement. The little creature certainly did love to help out.

"Do you think you could go get me a cloth soaked in warm water?"

"I think that might be a bit too big for me to carry, mieu."
"You don't need to bring the water," Asch chuckled, "Just the wet cloth."

"Oh okay!" The little cheagle promptly bounced down the stairs.

Asch could hear the soft mumble of everyone else as they talked downstairs. So everyone else was up too. Asch quietly listened but couldn't make out what anyone was saying. Then eventually, over the soft mumble of their discussions, Asch heard a scuffling noise, followed by slop, as a wet cloth hit the ground. Then came the scuffling, and another slop, and the cycle continued until Asch's curiosity got the best of him and he stood up to investigate.

The source of the sound was the little cheagle as he fought to get the cloth up the stairs. He had soaked the cloth with water and it was too heavy for him to bounce back up the stairs with, so instead he would toss the cloth up to the next step, then jump up himself and repeat the process. Asch hopped down the first few steps to where the cheagle had made it and picked up the cloth, allowing Mieu to hop up onto his shoulder. Asch stole a glance into the living room where everyone was, but took off back up the stairs when he was noticed.


'Nothing important.' Asch replied as he took he place on the bed again. 'I'm just going to clean you up a bit. We can't leave you like this.' Luke didn't know what to say, so instead he watched as Asch removed the bloodstained pieces of fabric that had once been his jacket and threw them in the garbage. Once that was gone, the number of bruises and cuts became all the more obvious. None of them were major injuries, but there were so many...

Luke could feel the guilt build up in his older brother as he began to wash the dried blood and dirt off Luke's face.

'Asch...'

'I'm sorry.' Asch pre-empted whatever Luke was going to say

'No, don't apologize.' Luke replied softly. 'I'm glad you did it. I don't think you would have gotten through to me any other way.'

'I don't care. It's still no excuse for having hurt you like that.'

'Okay,' Luke replied with an exasperated sigh, 'how about we make a deal. I won't feel guilty about what you showed me last night if you stop feeling guilty about having hurt me. We'll call it even.'

'But that wasn't your-

'I don't care.' Luke cut Asch off. 'Do we have a deal?'

Asch couldn't help but smile. 'Fine. It's a deal.'

Out of the corner of his eye, Asch noticed Mieu curl up on the bed near Luke's feet and promptly fall asleep. He chuckled. All that effort must have worn the poor little thing out.


He was avoiding the others.
Of course, it made sense now that Luke thought about it. He could only imagine what it must have looked like to everyone else. Asch mysteriously comes back from the dead, or miraculously survived Akzeriuth's fall, depending on how you looked at it; either way he then proceeds to attack his twin brother and successfully cut him into ribbons. Yeah...they would have a lot of explaining to do.

'So then why did you come to Tear's house?' Luke tried.

'I wouldn't have if I had known it was Tear's house.' He replied. 'I just asked the first person I came across where we could stay and he directed me here saying that the regular occupant was out of town. He told me I was welcome to use the bed upstairs and that I could grab an extra cot from the storage room. It wasn't until they all showed up later that I realized it belonged to Tear.'

'What did they say?'

'Nothing, they thought I was asleep.'

'You're going to have to go downstairs eventually. I somehow doubt the secrets to Van's plans can be found in Tear's bedroom.'

'You never know...' Asch jokingly replied.

Luke chuckled at the joke and simply watched as Asch finished with the cloth and proceeded to bandage Luke's wounds as best he could with what few supplies he had. Asch worked slowly, putting off the inevitable. Luke could sense just how much he was loathing trying to explain everything. And he wouldn't have Luke to back him up.

Luke could only hope it would go over better than his attempts at explaining Akzeriuth had.

A flash of red caught her eye as Asch darted back up into Tear's room. Natalia still couldn't believe it. It was Asch. Asch had actually come back to her. She had almost given in to the fact that she had lost him forever this time. But he had come back.

She had been so happy to see him. At first she didn't believe her eyes, but there he was. She had wanted nothing more than to run up to him, hold him, and never let him go. But before she had made it two steps, he had drawn his sword, on Luke of all people. Certainly after Akzeriuth Luke more than deserved it, but Asch wasn't typically inclined to agree with her on those points. And despite the fact she was always trying to get Asch to scold him when necessary, something about this had seemed off, and it had frightened her.

"Asch! What the hell are you doing?"

She hadn't been the only one. Guy's outraged cry had fallen on deaf ears as the two boys had fought, completely oblivious to the rest of the world. Jade had forbidden any of them to try and get between the two. There was no saying who was on what side anymore, and Jade wouldn't risk anyone else getting hurt. But it was Asch; surely he of all people would have a reason for acting as he did, no matter how it appeared to the rest of them. So they could only watch on as two of the closest people they knew, chased after each other's life.

Then there had been that laugh. That horridly sad and insane laughter that escaped Luke; it had made her hair stand on end. If she closed her eyes, she could still hear it, and it gave her the shivers even now. But it was the only thing that had come out of either of them. There was never any
attempt to talk, any effort made to discuss; they had simply gone straight for each other's throats. Just what had happened between them?

Things just went on and on, getting worse by the second. Natalia found herself cringing every time she heard Luke crash into the stone leaving trails of blood behind him. Just when she though she couldn't take it any more, Asch clearly won, and Luke's sword went skidding across the ground. He placed his sword in Luke's face and watched him until he lost consciousness. No one had dared say a word. She so desperately wanted to talk to him, to ask him what was going on, anything, but the words froze in her throat, and she didn't know what to say.

Once Luke had lost consciousness, Asch sheathed his sword. He picked up Luke's, sheathed it, then removed it from Luke and hung it over his shoulder. Then much to their surprise, he pulled out some bandages from one of his pockets and quickly tied up the most severe of Luke's injuries. He then knelt down, managed to get his unconscious brother onto his back and proceeded to brush right past the rest of them as if they didn't even exist.

"What do you suppose that was all about?" Tear had inquired once the boys were out of sight.


"It's strange though." Ion had added, "Why would Asch provoke Luke, go through the trouble of overwhelming him, injuring him, and then turn around and take care of him like that. It doesn't make any sense."

"Not when you put it like that." Jade had simply replied.

Natalia felt inclined to agree with Ion. Asch's action just simply didn't make any sense. They hadn't had the chance to speak with him since then either. Everyone had been incredibly surprised to find them both asleep in Tear's room when they got there. Admittedly they'd had some forewarning. A man on the street had stopped Tear and apologized for sending a couple of guests to her house since she wasn't expected back for a couple months yet. Tear reassured the man that it was fine, and they had proceeded to find the boys sound asleep in her room.

She had so desperately wanted to speak with Asch, to ask him what was going on. But she didn't have the heart to wake him, and they all decided that it could wait until everyone had a good night's rest. None of them had had any real sleep since before Akzeriuth.

So now they were here, patiently waiting for Asch to come downstairs. Discussing what they thought was the reason behind yesterday's... events. The possibility also existed that Asch also knew what happened in Akzeriuth, a fact that greatly seemed to interest Jade. But what else was there to know? Luke had clearly admitted to being at fault. It was obvious, just what more could there be?

Jade noted the frequent looks he got from the Kimlascan princess and wondered if she was going to ask the question he knew was on her mind. But she averted her gaze and instead began speaking with Tear.

He himself had quite a few questions for the young noble, whenever he decided to grace them with his presence, which, judging by how quickly he had bolted back upstairs, may yet be awhile. He wasn't stupid; he knew the interrogation he was due to face as soon as he came down.

But Jade wasn't so much interested in the reasoning behind Asch's rash actions towards Luke the previous day, rather if Asch felt the need to assault Luke for whatever reason he deemed necessary, far be it from him to stand in his way. What he wanted was another vital piece of information that
Asch potentially held: what had really happened in Akzeriuth.

While the others had been content to blame Luke and have that be the end of it, something with that reasoning didn't sit right with Jade. It left the question as to how the young noble could have done it, unanswered. Even after speaking with Ion to get more details on the passage rings themselves, all the possibilities he could come up with didn't make sense.

First there was the possibility that Luke had unknowingly tampered with the passage ring somehow. But that could easily be ruled out by a simple fact: The passage ring hadn't been tampered with, it had been outright disintegrated.

So then it boiled down to one thing: what exactly could disintegrate a passage ring like that? Passage rings were Dawn Age technology, and not even the Order of Lorelei had the slightest clue how, or out of what, they were made. There was really only one thing Jade could think of with that kind of destructive potential. A hyperresonance.

But that theory too had its flaws. While Luke was indeed a Seventh Fonist, and an untrained one at that, when they had found him, he had been alone. It took two Seventh Fonists to cause a hyperresonance. That implied that there had to have been someone else, another Seventh Fonist, in the passage ring with Luke.

Perhaps Tear's suspicions about her brother's hand in the matter weren't completely unfounded. Commandant Grants was a Seventh Fonist, but his lack of presence in Akzeriuth bothered Jade. Rather than put him in the passage ring with Luke, it seemed more likely he had known what would happen and was already long gone.

The only remaining candidate was Asch. Asch and Luke causing a hyperresonance made far more sense, and was much more likely considering just how similar the two were, but that didn't work either. Asch wasn't the type of person who would run away and leave Luke to take all the blame. If anything, he was more likely to have shouldered all the blame himself. Jade didn't doubt that if he had ever been in the passage ring with Luke, he had been forcefully removed. That of course introduced the question of who... and Jade was right back at square one. There was a critical piece of the puzzle missing, and Jade knew that as soon as he found that piece, everything else would fall into place. The question remained, was that piece in the hands of the young Kimlascan noble?

The room fell silent as Asch made his way down the stairs. He watched them apprehensively, as he suddenly became the focus of everyone's attention. No sooner had he stepped off the last step, had Guy grabbed him by the collar and pinned him up against the wall. Everyone in the room held their breath, but no one came to Asch's defence.

"What the hell did you do to Luke?!" Guy demanded, practically lifting the young noble off the ground. Guy's anger towards Asch had reached an all time high, and that was saying something. He was so completely and utterly disgusted with him. Luke trusted Asch more than he trusted anyone else! How could Asch have done that? How could he have just beaten him up, without giving any sort of rhyme or reason for it?! And after everything Luke had just been through!

Asch looked Guy straight in the eye, with the most venomous look any of them had ever seen.

'What did I do?" Asch seethed, his voice getting louder with every word, "I gave him something to hold onto! Even if that something was hatred, I gave him something to live for! It was a hell of a lot more than any of you did!"

An awkward and guilt-ridden silence filled the room and Guy released his hold on the red head, retreating to a far corner of the room, his own venomous looks never leaving the boy he had just
"Asch?" Natalia finally spoke up.

"What is it?"

"It is really you… isn't it?" She hesitantly asked.

"It's me." He replied with a soft smile. Before he could say anything else, he found the princess in his arms and he held her in return.

"How did you escape Akzeriuth? We all thought you had died." Natalia inquired, still holding onto him as if he would vanish should she let go, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Yes, I'm certain our young princess isn't the only one who would like to know." Jade added as Asch gently separated himself from Natalia.

"Van got me out." Asch eventually replied.

Her brother did? Tear watched Asch as he faced the rest of them, a mix of emotions on his face. Tear couldn't quite pick out what Asch was feeling. It had sounded like resentment in his voice. Did he not want to be saved? Or was her brother more involved in Akzeriuth's collapse than the others seemed led to believe? But no, Luke had admitted to it. Though his intentions may not have been malicious, he had still admitted fault. It just didn't make sense.

"See Tear!" Anise piped up, "The Commandant didn't have anything to do with it! He's the one that saved Asch!"

"Didn't have anything to do with it?!" Asch yelled in outrage, "Van-"

'Asch don't!' Luke's cry stopped Asch mid sentence. 'Don't…'

'Why shouldn't I? After all this, why should we hide the truth?! Why let them believe it was all your fault?'

'It doesn't matter anymore. Whether I was at fault or not, it doesn't change the fact that it still happened.'

The rest of the group watched Asch, waiting to find out what had caused his sudden fury. But his anger seemed to appease before he spoke again.

"Van isn't to be trusted. I found out that much." He spat, refusing to meet anyone's gaze.

"But he saved you from Akzeriuth didn't he?" Anise inquired.

"I get the feeling there's more going on here than we realize." Ion intervened, earning him a grateful smile from Asch. "Would it be best we not inquire for the time being?"

"Thank you Fon Master." Asch replied, "I still have quite a bit to sort out."

"No kidding. I mean his twin brother just annihilated a town." Anise mumbled, earning her a glare from Asch. "Hey!" she protested, "Don't look at me like that! You're the one who showed up and beat him up! Isn't that why you did it?"

"What would you know?"
"I could ask you the same thing. You haven't been around since Akzeriuth. You didn't see how he acted or hear what he said! What do you think you know?"

"I know that I showed up in Yulia City and found my brother half insane. How about you tell me the rest?"

"Oh you're going to lecture me after what you did yesterday? Admit it! You know full well that he's the low, good for nothing brat that he is, and you're just trying to defend him!" Anise glared back at Asch. "Well I don't care. You weren't there, the things he said made me sick. I don't think I've ever hated anyone that much in my life!"

Luke was taken aback as he watched the scene play out before him. He knew Anise had been mad, but she really hated him. As cruel as the things she said were, they felt genuine. She wasn't putting up a front, it was how she really felt. Luke fought to keep his emotions under control since he could tell Asch was already struggling to do the same. He didn't need to have to deal with Luke's overwhelming sense of disappointment and guilt on top of his own growing anger.

"I don't have time for this." Asch forcefully replied letting out a frustrated sigh before he tore the child before him to pieces. "Tear, where can I find the mayor?"

"The mayor? Why?"

"I want to see about going back up to the surface as soon as possible."

"And you're just going to leave Luke?"

"Yeah." Asch replied without a second thought. He and Luke had already discussed it and had decided to leave as soon as possible, rather than wait the few days it would take for Luke to fully recover. As it stood, Luke wasn't physically well enough to do the heavy travelling that was likely going to be necessary, so he had decided to tag along with Asch until his body healed rather then remain aimlessly in Yulia City. But it's not like they could explain that to the others.

"I can't believe you! You're just going to abandon him? Just like that?!"

"Look at the pot calling the kettle black." Asch shot back.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

'Asch...' Luke's warning tone helped settle some of the anger that had been building up inside of him.

'Fine.' He replied to Luke before saying anything aloud. "Nothing. Do you know where I can find him or not?"

"My grandfather is usually in the conference center next door." Tear curtly replied.

"What are you doing that's so urgent?" Jade demanded as Asch began towards the door.

"There's something important I have to look into." He replied, turning to face his newest inquisitor. Jade simply stared at him for a moment. Asch had no idea what he was looking for, but he met the Colonel's unnerving gaze, and after a moment, he seemed satisfied, as if he'd decided something for himself.

"You realize you'll probably have to take the Tartarus correct?"
"The thought had crossed my mind." Asch replied.

"Good. With Akzeriuth's sudden disappearance, I doubt there will any ferries running. It wouldn't do you any good to wind up stranded now would it?"

"No, not especially. But where do you plan to get the manpower to run that thing? Since I assume you're planning on tagging along."

"Well staying here indefinitely doesn't seem especially productive, and I do have a few things I would like to look into myself. As for manpower, that depends on whether staying here indefinitely appeals to our young Fon Master Guardian here." Jade replied with a smirk in Anise's direction.

"Of course we'll help." Ion offered. "But are you really determined to leave so soon? I'm certain Luke will recover quickly."

"I'm certain." Asch replied, much to Ion's disappointment.

"It's your decision to make, I won't say any more on the matter." He replied.

'See, I told you they care about you.' Asch stated as Ion took a seat on one of the couches.

'You don't have to keep this up. This isn't fair to you. I can stay here for a few days.' Luke protested, noting the animosity towards his sibling.

'It's okay, I don't mind. As long as you don't feel like I'm abandoning you here.'

'I don't, I know it's important we figure out what Master Van is up to as soon as possible, before more people get hurt. Besides I want to try and help however I can.'

'You just know you'd go crazy from the boredom if you stayed.' Asch taunted.

'Shut up.' Luke jokingly shot back.

"I can't believe you. I don't even want to have anything to do with you." Asch heard Guy mumble as he left the room out a back door. Asch sighed, he hadn't realized a smile had crept onto his face as he joked around with Luke. It had successfully antagonized Guy, and from the looks of things Tear wasn't all that impressed either. Well not much point in hanging around now.

"I'm going to find the mayor, I'll be back sometime later." Asch stated as he closed the door behind him.

"Asch wait!" Natalia said once he had left and quickly slipped out the door after him.

"Are you going to come along too Tear?" Anise asked the melodist.

"No. I have no reason to return to the Outer Lands for the time being." She replied. "Guy what are you doing?" She inquired as the blonde popped back in the room and made his way towards the stairs.

"Sorry I know we said we'd let him sleep, but I'm waking Luke up, there's something I have to talk to him about."

"Asch wait!" Asch stopped and turned around to see Natalia chasing after him.
"What is it Natalia?"

"I just…I wanted to talk with you." Natalia hesitantly answered as she caught her breath.

"What's the matter?"

"Asch…why? Why did you really attack Luke like that?"

"Do you trust me?" was Asch’s simple response.

"What?" Natalia was caught off guard by his retort.

"Do you trust me?"

"Of course I do! I'd trust you with my life!"

"Then trust me that I had my own reasons for doing what I did, and leave it at that."

"Are you really leaving Luke here alone?"

"From the sounds of things he won't be completely alone. Tear isn't coming along, she's staying here, and I doubt Guy's going to come along either."

"But still…it's not like you to leave him behind like that."

"Everything will be fine. It's not like I'm leaving him behind forever, I'll be back for him by the time he's back on his feet." Luke chuckled, Natalia was the last person in the world he expected to be worried about him. Though she was more worried about Asch's behaviour concerning him, still coming from Natalia that was pretty unusual.

"Please don't do that again." Natalia said softly as she walked up to him and held him gently. "I thought I'd lost you again. After what happened seven years ago, I just can't- I can't lose you."

"Hey," Asch softly answered as he rested his cheek comfortingly on her head, "I'm not going anywhere anytime soon. You're coming with us when we head back up to the Outer Lands right?"

"Of course. I wouldn't dream of letting you go on your own."

"Good, because we may have some problems to deal with, and I'm going to need your help."

"What sort of problems?" Natalia took a step back so she could look into Asch's eyes.

"War problems," Asch replied as he pulled her closer again. "Akzeriuth disappeared, and I imagine we're both presumed dead, and not only us, but Luke too who's in line for the throne after you and me. I doubt things will stay peaceful much longer." There was a long silence where Natalia happily allowed herself to get lost in Asch's embrace, her presence gently helping appease his growing worries, if only just for that moment. "I'm sorry." Asch finally said.

"My goodness, whatever for?"

"It looks like that something special I promised you is going to have to wait a bit longer."

"That's okay, I don't mind waiting. It's our country after all."

"That it is," Asch replied letting Natalia go. He gave her a soft kiss on the forehead. "I'm going to go talk with the mayor. I'll see you back at Tear's house okay?"
"Alright." She replied softly and began making her way back.

'What are you so happy about?' Asch prodded his sibling who was just overflowing with mischievous amusement.

'Oh nothing.'

'Uh huh. I'll believe that the day you voluntarily clean your room.'

'It's organized chaos! If I clean it up I won't be able to find anything.'

'Whatever lets you sleep at night.' Asch taunted as has made his way up to the conference room.

'Hey you-'

'Shush for a bit.' Asch cut off Luke's retort.

"Are you the mayor of Yulia City?" Asch questioned the only person in the room. He was seated at the far end of a long conference table and looked up at the visitor.

"Yes, I am Teodoro."

"My name is Asch."  

"Ah yes, the young heir to Kimlasca's throne."  

"That's right…"

"Don't look so surprised young man. Very few people know of us, but we stay informed on matters concerning the Outer Lands."

"I see. I was wondering of you could help me with something."

"You seek a way back to the Outer Lands, don't you?"

"How-"

"Is it really that hard to believe that you would want to leave? This Qliphoth is no place for humans to live."

'I wonder why they all live here then.' Asch repeated Luke's question.

"We are the watchers. We cannot leave this land," Teodoro replied, "but if you are looking for a way to the Outer Lands, you are welcome to utilize the Yulia Road."

"The Yulia Road is used to transport people up to the Outer Lands from here?"

"That is correct."

"Is there any way that it would be possible to raise the Tartarus as well?"

"It would be difficult, but possible. We may be able to attach a fonon activator to the ship that will allow you to use the last of the power Akzeriuth's Sephiroth possesses to push you up. It would be dangerous; do you need the ship that badly?"

"I'm afraid we do."
"Alright then, I'll arrange to have preparations done as soon as possible. You should be prepared to leave within a few hours."

"Thank you very much. But before you go, may I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"Is it true that Akzeriuth's fall was predicted in the Score?" Teodoro looked at the boy, almost surprised at the nature of the question.

'Wait a second! You think it might be true?' Luke was also surprised by the question. He had come to believe that it had been a lie Master Van had used to trick him.

"Yes, Akzeriuth's fall was foretold in the Score." Teodoro replied before leaving to make preparations.

'No way that's impossible! If it was in the Score, why didn't anyone do anything about it?!' Luke yelled in outrage.

'Easy there…' Asch cringed as if Luke had yelled in his ear. 'It's probably part of the Closed Score that the Order of Lorelei keeps secret.'

'But someone had to have known about it! Why didn't anyone do anything! Why did all those people have to die?!'

'Luke, try to calm down. I understand how you feel, and to be honest I agree with you, but think about it from a different standpoint. The Score promises prosperity, and if the Score isn't followed then we lose that prosperity.'

'There's no point to prosperity if you're dead before you reach it.'

'I agree with you there.'


'No it isn't. It's Uncle and the others, they knew too. It would explain why he refused to let me and Natalia come, and why he kept trying to talk Ion out of it.'

'What?' Luke suddenly remembered the conversation he had overheard in the drawing room. 'Wait you're right. Father too. I overheard him talking about it but at the time I didn't know what it was.'

'Father knew too?' Asch sounded disgusted.

'What's the matter all of a sudden?'

'That's just so like Father.'

'What is?'

'Not to give a damn about whether his son is about to go die.'

'Come on Asch, that's not it.'

'Oh come on! Since when has he ever given a damn about either of us?!

'Sure he's distant and doesn't really spend time with us but he's not that bad of a person.'
'How can you be so calm about it?! Don't you care at all?'
'I don't know...he's our father. I'm sure he has his reasons.'
'You're a naïve fool.'
'Yeah well, I'm seven. Deal with it.' Luke shot back and Asch just burst out laughing. Leave it to Luke to turn it all around like that. Now all that was left was to go get the others and they could finally be on their way.

"Come on Jade!" Guy was yelling at the necromancer when Asch walked in the door. "Don't give me that crap about him being fine! I can't wake him up!"

"I've already told you," Jade repeated in a surprisingly calm voice considering he had a blond in his face, "Luke's pulse is normal, his breathing is regular and his heart rate isn't out of the ordinary. If it wasn't for the fact that you can't wake him up, I would say he is simply sleeping." Asch quietly made his way up the stairs while Guy continued to yell at the Colonel.

"Lay off Guy." Anise pitched in after a moment. "What else do you want him to tell you? He can't make Luke magically wake up any more than you can."

Guy let out a frustrated sigh. "I know that but, I can't just do nothing. I'm going to check on him again."

"You realize nothing will have changed from when you checked on him 5 minutes ago right?" Anise pointed out. Guy simply waved his hand dismissing her taunt as he made his way up the stairs.

"You're back!" Mieu hopped up when he saw Asch come upstairs.

"Shhh." Asch quieted the young cheagle, Guy's yelling was clearly audible all the way upstairs.

"Are you really going to leave Master all alone, mieu?"

"Just until he gets better, I wouldn't leave him for good. There's just something I have to take care of first."

"But why not wait for Master to wake up?"

"Because it's something really important, and Luke wouldn't forgive me if I waited. Besides, even if he did wake up, he's still not all better. If he came with us as he is now, he would probably end up getting hurt again. I wasn't able to protect him in Akzeriuth, so I'm going to make sure he stays safe this time." Asch replied.

"I'm going to stay with Master." Mieu replied.

Asch smiled as he ruffled the fur on the little cheagle's head. "Okay... you watch over him for me."

"I will. What should I tell him if he wakes up?" Mieu inquired.
"Don't worry, I'll be back by the time he's up."

"But what if he wakes up before then? He'll be all confused and sad and mieuuuu."

Asch had to bite his lip, Luke was already dying of laughter at the back of his mind at just how complex Asch's web of lies was growing, and at the level of concern the little creature possessed.

"Then tell him I'll be back for him, or that if he's feeling better, he can come find me." Asch managed.

"But how will he know where you are?" The young cheagle insisted. Asch let out a snort before managing to compose himself.

"If he doesn't know, tell him to wait for me."

Mieu looked at him strangely for a moment, but decided against inquiring for the reason behind the strange sounds and faces Asch was making. "Okay!"

"Alright, I'd better go, take good care of him." Asch stood up from where he had taken a seat on the bed.

"I will. Good luck!"

'You are so dead later' Asch shot at Luke who was still stifling his laughter.

'I know, that's why I figured I'd best enjoy myself while I can.'

'Yeah well-' Asch stopped dead in his tracks when he turned to head down the stairs. He found himself looking into a pair of blue eyes. "Guy." The blonde didn't answer. "What do you want?" Asch tried, deciding he probably wasn't interested in idle chatter.

"You need another person to help with the Tartarus right?" The blonde finally said.

Asch simply shrugged. "No idea, ask Jade. Besides I thought you didn't want to have anything to do with me."

"I'm not going because of you. I want to see just what you think is so important you're leaving Luke behind." He replied, turning around and heading back down the stairs.

'He overheard us.' Asch stated as he followed Guy down the stairs.

'You really think that's why he changed his mind? Maybe he just wanted to help you.' Luke offered.

'He's not doing this for me; he's doing it for you.'

"Ahh there you are," Jade spoke up once Asch made it downstairs. "A messenger just arrived from the mayor; the preparations for the Tartarus are complete."

"Good," Asch replied, "Then let's go."

"Wow, the Tartarus is in pretty good condition considering what it's been through." Asch commented as he ran his hand along the relatively straight railing of the deck.
"Indeed, it's held up rather nicely." Jade commented as he gave the deck a quick glance. He had done a far more thorough inspection of the Tartarus after it had fallen from Akzeriuth. While the hull had sustained some damage, all the engines and operating systems were still intact, and there was little compromise to the ship's maneuvering capability.

"What the hell is this?" Anise yelled from the other end of the deck. Asch made his way over to where Anise was standing. At her feet was a giant pile of what looked like crimson feathers.

As soon as Asch got closer, a head poked up out of the red mess and Asch found himself under assault by the huge creature. Everyone had their weapons drawn and ready to fight when they realized that Asch was laughing as the creature nuzzled him. Asch eventually managed to calm the bird down but couldn't convince it to move aside. Instead he absently stroked the bird's plumage while under the confused gaze of everyone else.

"Care to explain?" Jade offered.

"I have no idea, it was the bird Van used to get me out of Akzeriuth, and it was how I got to Yulia City after that. I have no idea what it's still doing here though." Asch offered. The bird just responded by nuzzling him.

"Awww he likes you." Ion spoke up, "I bet he waited here for you since the citizens wouldn't let him in city."

"Well if it likes Mr. Temper over here it must like anyone." Anise reached out to pet the bird. Rather than indulgently allow the handling like it did for Asch, it turned vicious and snapped at the young girl causing her to shriek and retreat behind the Fon Master. "Hey! That stupid bird almost bit my hand off! Stupid thing..." Anise mumbled, "I bet Gloomietta raised it."

Asch stifled his own laughter, and grinned as he continued to pet the creature. Luke too was in fits of laughter at the back of Asch's mind.

"My, my," Jade pushed his glasses back up his nose, "the Fabres do seem to have a strange affinity for befriending monsters. How does the saying go? Birds of a feather?"

"Well that would explain why it's so comfortable on your ship." Asch shot back. Jade simply shrugged off the insult and made his way to the bridge where Guy had already installed himself and was keeping himself entertained by examining the various devices and switches on the panels.

"So what are you going to do with him?" Ion inquired with Anise still sending the thing death glares from behind him.

'Uh oh' Luke spoke up.

'What is it?'

'Your pet bird is going to eat my pet cheagle isn't it?' At Luke's comment Asch couldn't help it and burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?" Ion inquired.

"Somehow I don't imagine he'll get along very well with Mieu. I'll let him go once we've reached the Outer Lands."

"He certainly is majestic." Natalia commented, keeping her hands clear out of the bird's reach.
"Are you four coming?" Guy called impatiently from the bridge.

"Come on guys," Asch said as he managed to detach himself from the crimson bird that insisted on following him to the bridge. Thankfully the bridge was spacious enough and it was content to sit in one of the empty corners.

"So where are we heading?" Jade inquired.

'That's a good question, where are we going?' Asch questioned Luke.

'Well we wanted to know why Van destroyed the Sephiroth in Akzeriuth, right? So we should try and find some information about the Sephiroth. The best place for that would probably be Daath.'

'True,' Asch countered 'but Daath is where Van and the God-Generals have their base. I'd like to save that as a last resort. We could always try Baticul.'

'Baticul? Why would there be anything in Baticul?'

'Well after you were born we gathered a lot of books and papers on fomicry. It's possible something about the Sephiroth and Dawn Age technology got mixed in.'

'No.' Luke abruptly cut off Asch's thought.

'Why not?'

'Please Asch. No.' Luke pleaded.

'Alright,' Asch conceded easily guessing the reason behind Luke's plea, 'I guess we could try Belkend then. They have a huge research lab there, they might have something.'

'Thanks.'

'We'll head for the research labs in Belkend." Asch stated. He looked around at all the empty seats. "Are you sure we can handle the Tartarus with this few people?"

"Yes, we'll be limited in mobility and attacking is out of the question, but it is operable." Jade replied.

"Alright then. Everyone ready? Let's depart."

'Back to the Outer Lands.' Asch added.

'Yeah, where we'll hopefully find some answers.'
"How much further is it?" Anise whined as they made their way through the woods.

"I'm certain it can't be that much further." Ion replied as he ducked under a low branch.

It had been a couple hours now that they had been wandering through the woods, slowly making their way towards Belkend. After their rather spectacular rise from the Qliphoth, they had spent most of the morning sailing to the port northeast of the city.

Everything had been going fine until Asch had spotted a group of Oracle Knights heading back to port. What were Oracle Knights doing way out here? While their presence somewhat reassured Asch that this wouldn't be a pointless venture, they didn't do much for his nerves, so he had insisted they go through the woods North of the road to stay out of sight.

Anise watched the redhead who was currently in the lead alongside Natalia. Neither he nor Guy said a word, though they had certainly had enough to say on the Tartarus. It was unreal. Sure they had never been comfortable around each other, but without Luke around, they were downright vicious. Anise ducked at the last second, the same low branch Ion had ducked under almost catching her as she was lost in thought. Jade who was behind her chose to push the branch out of his way rather than duck down, letting it go as soon as he passed by.

"Ow!" Guy cried.

"Shhht!" Asch harshly quieted the blonde, who shot him back a venomous look.

"Jade!" Guy hissed, keeping his voice down as not to attract unwanted attention, despite the fact he'd rather drop dead then take orders from Asch right about now. "What the hell was that? That branch hit me in the face!"

"I'm so sorry Guy," Jade replied, his voice laced with sarcasm, "I didn't even see you there. You know how it is when you get as old as I am, eyesight starts failing…"

"Yeah sure thing Jade," Guy shot back before picking up his pace and taking the lead. "Let's just get to Belkend already."

"My goodness, he certainly isn't any fun." Jade shrugged, getting more than enough enjoyment out of the stifled laughter his commentary had gotten from the redhead.

The city of fon machines was indeed that, a city full of fon machines and had Guy not been in such a foul mood, he would have been far more thrilled at the sights. The stone streets were lined with all sorts of machinery, and the buildings that stood along them gave the city a rather quaint feel in spite of its obviously industrial features. The famed Belkend labs, renowned throughout Auldrant for their research into fonic technology, were located at the heart of the city, giving everyone plenty of time to see some of the sights before getting there.

The labs themselves were almost as amazing as the city was. Grouped together in a building that was easily the size of a small town, with a layout that could mess with even the most oriented mind; they truly were a sight to behold. Asch let out a huge sigh.
'What's up?' Luke inquired.

'I don't think I actually thought this through. It's going to take us forever to go through this whole place.'

'Hmm,' Luke thought on it for a moment, Asch certainly had a point, the place was huge! There was no way they could go through all of it. 'Well maybe we could ask around and see if Van's been here.'

'That could be dangerous. I'd like to stay below the radar as much as possible. The longer we can go without him knowing we've been digging around, the better, and I doubt there's anyone in there we know.'

'Well then, I guess we'd best get started.' Luke replied.

'Easy for you to say.' Asch shot back jokingly.

'Oh shut up. I still have to read everything you read.'

'No, you don't.'

'I know, but I want to. You're always the one explaining things to me, I'd like to try and learn stuff on my own too.'

'That sounds funny coming from you. You hate reading, why the sudden change?'

'Because I don't want to end up in a situation like Akzeriuth ever again.' Luke replied simply.

'What makes you think that Akzeriuth had anything to do with your level of knowledge?' Asch decided to ask before getting on Luke's case again.

'I don't know, I can't help but feel that if I had known more, I would have been able to stop it.'

Asch listened to Luke, but the matter of fact tone that Luke took on as he spoke of this kept Asch from scolding him. He wasn't sulking or whining, or wallowing around in guilt, but he was looking at the matter objectively and trying to identify his flaws and find ways to make sure events wouldn't repeat themselves. Asch couldn't help but be impressed. He had never seen Luke approach something like that before. So he said nothing on the matter. While he certainly wasn't going to let Luke beat himself up about it, he didn't want to intervene if he could avoid it. Luke needed to learn how to deal with things on his own. After all, he wouldn't be there to hold Luke's hand forever.

"My goodness," Natalia looked at the building, "I don't remember these facilities being quite so extensive."

"We've got some work ahead of us." Asch replied.

"Well then shall we?" Ion said as he approached the entrance.

"Yes, let's go."

"Remind me why we're here again?" Anise complained after having wandered around the labs for a good half hour.
"Ah yes, well our young friend here has yet to divulge that information." Jade replied with a sly look at Asch.

"I'm certain Asch knows what he's looking for." Natalia piped in. "If he doesn't want to share with the rest of us-

"It's okay Natalia. Thank you." Asch cut her off. "I'm looking for information here."

"Yeah well, I hate to burst your bubble and all but the only thing we're doing is going in circles!" Anise ran to the center of the empty room they had just entered. "Now I'm not moving until you tell me what's up!"

But before Asch had the chance to tell the young girl off, the door on the opposite end of the room opened and one of the researchers entered. His gray hair and balding crown betrayed his advancing age, but the white lab coat and pile of papers he carried, identified him as one of the lab's researchers.

"Dr. Spinoza? What are you doing here?" Asch asked incredulously as he approached the man.

"Doctor?" Jade mumbled, "Now this should be interesting."

"Asch! How have you been doing lately?" Spinoza replied, surprised to see Asch of all people here.

"I've been fine thank you."

"How have those headaches of yours been?"

"Same as ever."

"That's too bad, I'm afraid I don't have anything to help you in that regard."

"That's alright. But what has you all the way out here?" The red head inquired.

"Ah yes well, I have a lab- er I mean, I have an office-" Spinoza stuttered. Asch simply chuckled.

"That's alright; I know you do research."

"I have a lab here in Belkend." Spinoza sheepishly admitted.

"Actually that's a good thing, maybe you can help me out with something."

"As much I'd hate to interrupt this wonderful conversation…" Jade butted in.

"Yeah you wanna slow down a sec and explain just what is going on here? How do you know some old guy from Belkend?" Anise asked.

"Spinoza is Luke's and my doctor. We used to come see him a lot when we were kids."

"Really?" The information piqued Jade's interest. "I didn't know you were a doctor."

"I got a degree in medicine before I undertook research," Spinoza replied.

"Is that so?" Jade continued.

"Yes. Certainly it mustn't be that uncommon. I hear you have one yourself Dr. Jade Balfour."

"So what made you decide to fall back on medicine?" Jade cut in quickly detouring the
"Actually, it was a private request from their family. I don't have any other patients."

"Yeah," Asch confirmed, also anxious to steer away from the reasons someone like Spinoza was asked to be their 'doctor'. After all, your normal everyday doctor could handle most things that popped up, but as far as he and Luke were concerned, there were some aspects in which they were pretty much useless. "In exchange for being our doctor, our family helps fund some of his research."

"Ah yes." Jade said after a moment of thought. "I think I remember a similar request, but I turned it down. By that point I had already joined the military."

'Thank Lorelei,' both redheads let out a simultaneous sigh of relief. The thought of Jade as a doctor was downright scary.

"No way! You used to do research Colonel?" Anise inquired.

"Yes but it was a long time ago." Jade replied.

"Yeah. Back when they were inventing the fork, Jade was right up there." Asch teased. Jade shot Asch a look that was the closest thing he would ever come to gratitude. Asch smirked, the least he could do was return the favour.

'What was that about?' Luke inquired.

'Nothing.' Asch replied. Luke obviously hadn't caught on, so Asch figured he'd leave him to figure it out on his own rather than have Luke fret about it. Of course he knew, he was the Jade Balfour after all.

"So Asch, how is Luke doing?" Spinoza inquired. An awkward silence fell over the group as Guy simply seethed an aura of pure resentment, despite the fact that he had yet to say a word.

"Luke's been okay." Asch replied, "He hasn't been all too great lately so he's enjoying some down time." At the back of Asch mind Luke was laughing. Down time huh? Laying unconscious in the Qliphoth of all places, didn't get much lower. Asch smirked as Luke enjoyed his pun.

'Having fun at all?' Luke managed.

'Oh you have no idea.'

"So what is it you were saying you needed help with?" Spinoza inquired.

"That's right." Asch replied, "Have you seen Van around here lately?"

"Van…as in Dorian General Grants?" Asch nodded and Spinoza thought on it a moment. "Yes in fact I have, it was a couple months ago. He's been working on something with a few of the other researchers. I think they're calling it the 'Preservation Project'. I'm afraid I don't know much else about it though, I've been quite busy with my own research lately."

"So do you have any idea what this 'Preservation Project' might be?" Asch tried.

"I'm afraid not, other than it has something to do with fomicry. I couldn't tell you anything else."

"That's alright. Also, do you know if there would be any information on the Sephiroth or other Dawn Age technology here?"
"Well you're more than welcome to look, but I highly doubt it. Most of the documents we have here pertain to current fon machines and physics. There might be the odd things on fomicry as well, but I'm afraid that's about all." Spinoza replied.

"Okay." Asch sighed disappointedly.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help."

"No, that's alright," Asch spoke up, "You've saved us having to dig through it all, thank you."

"It was my pleasure, next time you're around stop by, and say hello to Luke for me." Luke chuckled at the back of Asch's mind.

"I will."

By the time they made their way back out of the maze of labs and corridors, the sun was beginning to set. The golden light cast over Belkend gave the city a very calm look. It made Luke happy, it reminded him of that evening in Akzeriuth, and while the loss of Akzeriuth still saddened him, it still gave him a peaceful feeling that swept over his original, and Asch smiled.

"Asch." Jade drew the attention of the red head, his tone was serious. This had gone on long enough, he wanted answers.

"What is it old man?" Asch sighed, he was in a good mood, and while he knew this was bound to come sooner or later, he had hoped it wouldn't be so soon.

"Why are you inquiring about Commandant Grants' activities?"

"Because I know he's up to something." Asch stated simply.

"Yeah, sure. You're just ungrateful that he saved your life." Guy mumbled.

"Oh really? And since when do you care if I live or die?" Asch shot back.

"I don't. But Van chose to save you instead of saving Luke and I'm just trying to figure out why!"

"So this is about Luke?"

"Of course this is about Luke! Not that you give a damn about him."

"Excuse me?" Asch seethed.

"You heard me. Here you are off chasing some random theory you have, rather than staying with him and helping him recover! Now explain to me how that could possibly mean you are even so much as thinking about him!" Guy yelled back, getting more and more worked up.

"It's not like you stayed either."

"Yeah well when you said it was something important, that Luke would have wanted you to do, I thought it might actually be something important! Not some wild goose chase halfway around Auldrant because you can't come to terms with what happened in Akzeriuth!"

"You don't have a clue as to what happened in Akzeriuth!" Asch stated hatefully.
"Yeah, well neither do you! And don't make me remind you who was the one to beat Luke up about it!"

"Since when do you have the first clue as to why I choose to do something?!"

"Maybe because you never have any reasoning at all! You constantly make decisions for purely selfish reasons and then go on and on about how noble your intentions are! You never think about anyone other than yourself!" Guy yelled back at Asch.

"I'm not logical? How are you and your senseless fear of women supposed to be logical?!"

"You don't know anything about that!"

"Of course I don't! I don't read minds; for all that you seem to expect me to."

"That's because you never trust me! In all these years you never have! Not once!"

"You've never given me any reason why I should trust you." Asch stated maliciously.

"So is that why you would never leave Luke alone around me?"

"No, if I left him with you he'd end up nothing but a weak and spoiled brat!"

"Spoiled brat?! I'm not the one who constantly beats him down. Nothing he ever does is good enough for you! For heaven's sake let up! Not everyone in the world has to be as perfect as you seem to think you are!" Guy was livid.

"I may not be perfect, but you sure as hell aren't either." Asch shot back venomously. "Who the hell do you think you're kidding? The way you constantly cater to his every little whim day and night, it's a wonder he's grounded at all!"

"Don't even go there, you think you don't spoil him too?!

"Not nearly as much as you do. For all you may hate it, he still has to live in reality, just like the rest of us!"

"So I'm not allowed to want him to be happy?! What, are you the only person in this world allowed to have any joy at all?!"

"So you're saying all those times we spent together are completely irrelevant? All those memories, all those good times, it's all worthless?! None of that could possibly mean anything to Luke?! None of that ever made him happy?! It's all totally meaningless?!" Asch's volume shot up as Guy's last remark hit home.

"It sure as hell is to you! If you gave a damn, then you'd stop and think about that before putting Luke through hell!"

"So what, the rest of the world is supposed to be a kiss ass like you?!

"I am not a kiss ass! You're always yelling about how I dote on Luke all the time, saying that I spoil him too much, but you're no different!" Guy spat. "You always take the blame for things that happen or try to shove it off on something else. How is Luke ever going to learn to be responsible if you never let him take responsibility for what he's done?!

"Then how will you ever learn to understand anything unless you stop blaming the first thing that's convenient for all your problems?!"
"Don't talk about things like that when you don't know the first thing about them! You don't know anything about me!"

"No I don't. But I can say the same thing for you." Asch stated, quietly, but venomously.

"So this is it?" Guy said matching Asch's hateful gaze with one of his own.

"Yes it is." Asch replied.

"Fine then." Guy gave Asch one last hateful look before spinning around, and walking away.

"Wait! Guy, where are you going?" Anise called after the blonde.

"I'm leaving. I don't see any point in staying around any longer."

"But where are you going to go?" Ion asked.

"Somewhere I'm wanted." He yelled back before he vanished from sight.

At the back of Asch mind, Luke was almost in tears. He had no idea just how deep the distrust between Asch and Guy truly went. He had kept his mouth shut at first, but their argument had so very quickly gotten out of control, and he couldn't help but feel responsible. They had been arguing about him, and it was all so stupid! Why did anyone have to get hurt? Why couldn't they just get along?!

"So what now?" Jade inquired of Asch who watched the blond go.

"We're not going to find anymore information here." Asch stated, "Let's spend the night and head for Daath. I'd rather avoid God-General headquarters, but I don't see any other options right now."

"But Asch," Natalia interrupted.

"Don't worry Natalia, we'll head for Baticul as soon as we're done in Daath." Asch provided.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" She asked, as she stared in the direction Guy had stormed off.

"Yeah, let's get some sleep and we'll set off in the morning."

The passage to Daath proved to be rather uneventful. The day and a half trip on the Tartarus passed with a tense silence that blanketed them all. Even Luke had been relatively quiet since the fight with Guy. He hadn't gotten angry at Asch like the last time; he knew that not only Asch was at fault. Guy had taken some pretty low shots as well, but that didn't change the fact that he was still upset. Upset, and disappointed in them both. But he wasn't the only one that was unsettled, since then Asch had been in a bad mood, and every one was walking on eggshells around him.

"So there you are." Jade said as he joined Asch by the starboard railing.

"Yeah, what do you want?" Asch replied.

"Now, now don't be short with me young man. You can hardly afford to antagonize anyone else." Jade teased, but Asch wasn't in the mood for jokes, and didn't reply. "You know," Jade tried again, "You still haven't answered my question."
"What question would that be?"

"Why are you looking into Commandant Grants' activities? And just so you're aware, 'I know he's up to something' is not a valid answer."

"Why should I tell you, old man?"

"Because I was polite and asked rather than torture it out of you." Jade replied, earning him a pointed look from Asch.

'He's not serious is he?' Luke wondered.

'Of course not.' An annoyed Asch shot back.

'I don't know, I wouldn't put it past him…' Luke's weak attempt at a joke didn't so much as elicit a response from his sibling. He really wasn't in a very good mood.

'I'm joking.' Jade provided after a moment of silence.

'I'm laughing on the inside, really.' Asch rolled his eyes.

'No you're not.'

'Shit up.' Asch replied. Oh…Luke grinned, that one almost got a smile out of him.

"You're not dodging the question this time." Jade stated, drawing Asch away from his sibling's frivolous attempts to cheer him up.

"Oh, really? Just watch me." Asch said with a smirk.

"This has to do with Akzeriuth, doesn't it?" Jade remained serious, his gaze never leaving the red head. He was waiting for it, it never failed. Asch averted his gaze, looking out at the water instead. And there it was. If the boy had one flaw, it was that he couldn't look someone in the eye and lie to them. Though whether or not that was a flaw remained somewhat debatable.

"Why would you think that?" Asch replied, still not looking at the Colonel. "You've heard it from everyone, just like I have."

"Yes, but I haven't heard it from you." Jade pointed out. "Not once have you explicitly said that you believe Luke to be at fault, or rather, you have yet to mention anything about it at all. Why is that?"

Asch didn't answer.

"You know what happened down there don't you?"

Jade still got no reply.

"And it has to do with Commandant Grants, which is why you were so anxious to get back and find out what he's trying to do. Even if that means going head first into enemy territory, even if it means leaving Luke behind, you still need to find out what it is; before more people get hurt. Am I wrong?"

"I don't know what you're talking about old man." Asch stretched. "But as much as I'd love to listen to your crazy stories, I'm going to take a nap. We'll be reaching port soon and I'd rather not have to take on a God-General half-asleep."
"You're doing it again." Jade taunted.

"I warned you didn't I?" Asch shot back as he made his way inside and into his sleeping quarters, leaving Jade alone on the deck with his half answered questions.

"Do you really distrust me that much?"

"Natalia." Asch grabbed the princess' arm.

"Asch, what is it?" Natalia replied concerned but quieted when Asch brought a finger to his lips. What was he listening for? The rest of the group behind them quieted as well, sensing Asch's concern. Jade too was listening intently, just what was it? Their trip from the port had been frightfully uneventful, which she certainly wouldn't complain about, but it seemed that it wouldn't stay that way much longer.

She looked around, and this was a bad place for it to become eventful. They had just entered the opening of the valley cutting through the mountains that surround Daath. The rock walls on either side made closing them in much easier. At the foot of those mountains was a small patch of woods on either side of the road, giving potential attackers a good cover. It was no wonder everyone was on edge.

Then she heard it as well, the faint rustling of leaves as someone made their way through the woods to their left. Asch gave a slight nod in her direction. In the blink of an eye, she spun around, notching an arrow and sending it flying in the direction of the noise she had heard. At the same moment Jade sent a spear crashing into the woods on the other side. Two people stumbled out of the woods from either side, just barely dodging the blows. Bandits. Just great.

"The rest of you can come out too!" Asch called, drawing his sword.

The two bandits that had been attacked recovered themselves and a third joined them blocking the group's retreat, while three more blocked the road towards Daath.

'Are we going to have to fight them?' Luke questioned as Asch carefully eyed both groups of bandits.

'Most likely.'

"Let us through!" Asch called to the group before them. The bandits gave no response. They simply grinned, revealing their weapons. They consisted of an assortment of knives and swords, that they had stolen off of some less fortunate travelers no doubt.

Without warning the first bandit struck, and was quickly followed by the others, beginning the scramble. Luke knew there was nothing he could do to help, no matter how much he wanted to. All he could do was follow along with Asch as he made his move. It was the strangest sensation.

He could feel Asch's movements. They were smoother and much more experienced than his own. There was no hesitation in his strike, no fighting against the urge to stay his hand at the last moment. He flowed swiftly and fluently from one move to the next, he wouldn't slow down, he wouldn't stop. Because if he did, someone might get hurt; he might end up losing someone important to him, and he swore he would never let that happen again.

Two of the bandits had fallen; Asch jumped back and did a quick assessment of the situation. Ion
had taken cover in the nearby woods, carefully watching for any bandits that might try and sneak up on him, moving if a scuffle came too close. Anise, Jade and Natalia were each holding their own, and doing a formidable job. The bandits were trying to corner them, group them together. Well that plan certainly had one major flaw in it, if they grouped everyone together, they were grouped together themselves.

Fonic artes were always something that had evaded Luke. No matter how hard he had tried, he just couldn't grasp the concept of how it worked, and he had never so much as come close to pulling one off. But as Asch quieted his thoughts and drew in the fonons, it surprised Luke just how similar to a hyperresonance they really were. The basic skills were almost identical.

Luke could feel the flow of the fonons, as Asch drew them in and wove them together with his incantation, giving them a physical form. An iridescent blade of third fonons crashed down on the bandits, and Asch relaxed, allowing the last fonons to dissipate. Luke remained in awe, maybe fonic artes weren't as completely beyond his reach as he thought.

"You guys alright?" Asch approached the group as Ion carefully rejoined them. Instead of answering, Natalia drew an arrow and before anyone could breath, sent it flying towards Asch, missing his ear by an inch and sticking into the bandit behind him.

"I am now, thank you." Natalia smiled.

"You're scary sometimes you know that?" Anise piped up as she placed Tokunaga over her shoulders.

"Hmph." Natalia indignantly looked away and everyone laughed.

"Shall we be on our way?" Ion spoke up after a moment.

"Yes," Jade pushed his glasses back up his nose. "Let's be off."

"Whoa!" Luke couldn't believe what he saw when they finally made it too Daath. The tower was huge! It was probably as tall as Baticul! They had seen the large black structure that served as the home to the Order of Lorelei from the moment they had gotten over the Fourth Monument Hill, but up close it was just that much more spectacular.

"So is this where you live Fon Master?" Asch inquired as the made their way up the stairs.

"It is; Anise and her family live here as well." Ion offered.

"That's amazing!" Luke's excitement was getting to Asch and he smirked before giving Luke a mental shove and telling him to calm down a bit.

"Yep, this is home. I can give you the grand tour if you like." Anise sang as she grabbed Asch's arm.

"Excuse me?!" Natalia put her hand on her hips.

"Well if want a turn then you'll have to get in line." Anise stuck her tongue out at the princess, and snuggled closer to Asch tauntingly.

"Why you little!"
"Please you two," Asch detached himself from Anise. "We're trying to keep a low profile, do remember this is where all the God-Generals are based."

"As much as I'm enjoying watching you spend quality time together," Jade added, "I'm inclined to agree. It would be best not to attract unnecessary attention for now."

"Well then, what is it you're looking for here in Daath?" Ion inquired.

"I'd like to find out as much as I can about the Sephiroth, especially anything pertaining to the Akzeriuth Sephiroth." Asch replied.

"Well then I guess the best place to start would probably be the library." Ion said after a moment's thought.

"Can you lead us there?"

"Certainly, it's the first room to your left once you enter the cathedral."

"The library?" Anise whined, "Man, it'll take forever to find anything in there!"

"Then I suggest we get started." Jade said with a smirk.


'Only sometimes?'

"Anise is still looking, but I think this is the last of them." Ion set down another stack of books on the table their group had appropriated.

"Thank you Fon Master." Asch closed the book he had been looking through and added it to the growing pile of books he had already gone through.

"There's no need for such formalities, you may call me Ion," the green haired boy smiled.

"Sure thing, Fon Master." Asch joked as he picked out a book from the pile Ion had brought over. Ion laughed.

"You're certainly making a lot of progress." Ion commented as he eyed the stack of discarded texts.

"No kidding!" Anise pitched in as she approached the table, unable to find anything else that looked remotely related to the topic at hand. "Man you read fast!"

"Well we've been at it for several hours now." Asch pointed out, not even looking up from the pages.

"Still," Anise pointed out as she picked up a bunch of books to put away, "even if you're just skimming, you're almost as fast as the Colonel!"

At that comment Asch peeked up over the top of his book, and the rest of them turned to look at Jade who was seated across the table. His eyes were darting across the page at impossible speeds and his discarded pile was easily twice the height Asch's was.

"I used to read a lot when I was younger." Asch provided as he returned to his own book.
"Really?" Anise asked incredulously.

"Yeah, why?"

"I don't know," she shrugged, "I guess you never struck me as the reading type."

"No," Asch said with a chuckle, "that's Luke."

"Luke doesn't like to read?" Ion inquired as Anise walked off.

"Not really. He's always preferred to go do something than just sit around and read."

"Yes, he is rather active." Ion commented as he took a seat next to Asch and picked up one of the books. Asch smiled.

'Speaking of you…' Asch prodded his sibling.

'Slow down!' Luke whined.

'What?'

'How do you read so fast? I can't keep up!'

'Practice.' Asch chuckled as he flipped the page.

'I give up, I can't keep up with you.' Luke let out a sigh.

'That's okay, at least you're trying. Besides, this one is useless.' Asch shut the book and added it to the pile.

'So have we made any progress at all?'

'A little,' Asch replied as he noted the setting sun outside the large window. 'But it's looking like we'll have to call it a day soon.' Across the table, Jade set down the book that he had been reading.

"Before you start another one," Asch interrupted as Jade reached for another text, "I'd like to see what we have so far."

Natalia closed the book she had been reading. She had only gone through a couple texts, since she didn't tend to skim for important information and ended up reading the entire thing. "I'm afraid I didn't come across anything that seemed useful." She admitted, placing her own text in Asch's discarded pile.

"What about you old man?" Asch inquired.

"Unfortunately, most of these," Jade replied indicating the stacks of books on the table next to him, "didn't have anything of much use. There was however one that provided some rather interesting information."

"Alright, I'll bite," Asch sighed, "what did you find?"

"According to this, the Sephiroth are operated by specific devices. That is what the passage rings are." Jade provided.

"I'm sorry," Natalia interjected, "but could you remind me what the Sephiroth are?"
"The Sephiroth are the ten pillars that support the Outer Lands and keep them floating above the Qliphoth," Ion provided. "Since the Sephiroth are created with memory particles, to those who don't know of the Qliphoth, they are known simply the planet's ten strongest fon slots."

"So these pillars that support the land are controlled by the passage rings?" Natalia inquired.

"That's right." Anise confirmed. "In Akzeriuth, the passage ring was completely destroyed so the Sephiroth gave out, and that's why the city collapsed."

"That's terrible! If these passage rings are so important and so fragile, why has nothing happened before now? If anyone can just walk up to them like that, surely we would have heard of something happening before now!"

"But they're not fragile." Asch interrupted. "We may not know what they're made of, but as far as we can tell, they're almost indestructible."

"Not just indestructible either," Jade jumped in before Natalia could object, "They're very well guarded. There are three different levels of protection."

"I found some information on that as well," Asch took over, "First off, each passage ring is sealed off by a Daathic seal."

"But wait," Anise interrupted, "we didn't see any kind of seal when we were in Akzeriuth, we just walked right in, and I doubt someone like Luke could have possibly figured out how to open it."

"I'm afraid that may be my fault." Ion spoke up.

"How so Fon Master?" Jade inquired.

"When I was with Arietta, we travelled to many of the Sephiroth and she had me unlock the seals. I wasn't sure of their intentions, but I never dreamed anything so dangerous could happen. Besides, I thought they would still be protected by the Albertesque and Yulian seals."

"The alba-what?" Anise inquired.

"The Albertesque and Yulian seals." Asch answered. "Remember Jade said there were three levels of protection? The first is the Daathic seal, but second is a seal known as the Albertesque seal. It's a seal centered around two of the Sephiroth. As long as those two Sephiroth remain active, then no one can actually operate the passage rings."

"Well that's good news." Anise said.

"No it isn't. One of those Sephiroth…was Akzeriuth." Asch stated.

"But as long as the other one is okay that means nothing bad can happen right?" Anise looked confusedly at Asch.

"I'm afraid that it's not quite so simple," Jade provided. "After all, the other Sephiroth that protected the Albertesque seal… was Hod."

"So both have fallen?!"

"Yes," Ion replied, "but the passage rings should still be protected by the Yulian seals. Also, operating the passage rings require the use of the Seventh Fonon. Not many people are capable of using the seventh fonon, much less to the extent that would be necessary to operate the passage
ring, so I don't believe that they are in any significant danger."

'That doesn't do us much good seeing as Van's a Seventh Fonist, and a descendant of Yulia to boot.' Asch sarcastically remarked.

'So the reason Master Van had me destroy the Sephiroth was…'

'Yeah, he probably wanted to break the Albertesque seal.'

'So you think his plans may have to do with the other passage rings?'

'It's very possible.'

'He's not going to try and drop the Outer Lands is he?!' Luke suddenly shouted.

'I have no idea.' Asch replied, 'but as much as I'd hate to think he would do something like that, we can't deny the possibility.'

"Jade," Asch spoke up, "did you find any information as to how the Yulian seals worked, or how they might be broken?"

"No, I didn't," the Colonel replied.

"Don't be so concerned," Ion placed a reassuring hand on Asch's arm. "As it stands, no one should be able to operate the passage rings. No one can accidentally cause an Akzeriuth."

'What about that Key of Lorelei thingy?' Luke inquired.

'What?' Asch replied in complete shock at the question Luke had just asked.

'I read it in one of the books you went through, but someone turned the page before I was done.'

'The Key of Lorelei is a sword that is part of a set that also includes the Jewel of Lorelei.' Asch laughed, 'There are lots of different rumours about them and whether or not they even exist. Some stories say that the Sword can gather fonons while the Jewel disperses them. According to the legend, they were a symbol of the pact that Yulia made with Lorelei. She used them to create the planet storm.'

'Couldn't something like that control the Sephiroth?'

'Probably, but according to the legend, Yulia cast them both down into the core, and that's even if they ever really existed. I don't think it's something that's going to come into play now.' Asch replied.

'I guess.'

"So shall we continue?" Natalia inquired, reaching for another book.

"No, I think that's more than enough for a single day." Jade replied.

"I agree," Asch spoke up, "I think that's plenty for now. I'm ready to call it a night. Shall we head for the inn?"

"Why don't you stay here in the Cathedral?" Ion suggested. "We've more than enough room."

"Wouldn't that be dangerous with the God-Generals so close?" Natalia inquired.
"I don't think it's that much of a problem," Jade pitched in. "If they're aware of our presence, we're in as much danger no matter where we are."

"I have to agree with Jade, we're gambling no matter where we stay, so we may as well stay here where we're close at hand in case they try to get Ion to open the rest of the Sephiroth." Asch added.

"All right, then the rooms are this way." Ion said as he led them across the large entrance to the cathedral.

The upper levels of Daath proved to be a veritable maze of corridors that put even the Belkend labs to shame and they were very glad to have Ion showing them the way. Asch very carefully noted the path that led up to the rooms where they'd be staying and made it a point to remember each turn in case he'd have to find his way back later. Jade easily caught on to what he was doing.

"Now, now, there will be no midnight wandering." Jade taunted as they made the last turn before coming upon a set of rooms. "We don't need you running into any God-Generals in the middle of the night."

"Why are you all looking at me when you say that?" Asch objected. Everyone just laughed.

"Well, I'm heading off. I'll meet up with you guys in the cathedral tomorrow morning!" Anise said as she spun around.

"I'll be off as well," Ion said with a bit of mirth still lingering in his voice. "Will you be able to find our way back down in the morning?"

"I'm certain we'll manage," Natalia offered. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"You don't need to thank me, it's the least I can do after the hospitality you showed us Baticul. Have a good night." The young Fon Master replied as he too returned from the direction in which they had come.

"So are we going to draw straws for rooms?" Asch teased.

'Ummm Asch, we don't have any straws.'

'I was joking stupid.' Asch responded amusedly. 'There's three rooms and three of us, we aren't drawing straws!'

'I knew that.' Luke protested.

'Sure you did.'

"I don't think that will be necessary, I think this one will be adequate for me." Jade replied indicating the door he was closest to.

"Alright then, we'll take this one," Asch yawned, "see you guys in the morning." He added as he entered the room closest to where he was and closed the door behind him, leaving two rather confused people in the hallway to ponder Asch's mysterious statement.

We?

Asch set his sword down by the wall and removed his jacket, hearing the other two doors close as
both Jade and Natalia settled in for the night. He flopped down on his bed and started at the ceiling for awhile before letting out a sigh.

'Feeling restless?' Luke hit the nail on the head.

'Yeah.' Asch grabbed his sword from where he had placed it near the door.

'Where are you going?'

'I'm just going to go for a walk.'

Luke chuckled as he contemplated what Jade would do when he found out, knowing that there would be no detouring Asch.

'Don't worry, I'll be careful.' Asch stated when he sensed Luke's concern.

'You better be.'

"What do you mean you didn't find anything?" The young pink-haired girl shrieked at the two Oracle Knights that stood before her.

"We're sorry ma'am." The first knight stuttered, "No one has been seen matching the Fon Master's description within the vicinity of Akzeriuth's former location."

"You're both completely useless! Go and search again! Increase your search parameters this time!"

"But ma'am…" The second soldier hesitantly interrupted, "We've been searching for almost two days non stop…"

"Do I need to remind you who you're looking for?!" Arietta's fury made the two soldiers step back in unison.

"No ma'am!" They both replied.

"Then go! I don't want to see your pathetic faces until you've found him!"

"Yes ma'am!" The soldiers answered, wasting no time getting out of her presence.

Arietta watched them go. Bunch of fools. Her friends were far more competent than the bunch of idiots that made up her 3rd division. But her friends hadn't had any more luck in locating Ion than the Oracle Knights had. Stupid Anise, this was all her fault! Her and those friends of hers! If they hadn't taken Ion away from her, then he wouldn't have been anywhere near Akzeriuth when it blew up and now… No he was alive, she knew he was alive, and she was going to find him, and bring him back home where she could keep him safe.

"You know," the voice came from behind Arietta, "You really shouldn't take out your anger over losing the Fon Master on your men."

"Shut up, Cantabile!" Arietta spun around to face the violet-haired woman. "You least of all should be the one lecturing me about that."

"True enough," Cantabile shrugged. "But do as I say, not as I do, kiddo."
"I am not a child!" Arietta protested.

"Of course not. You can't be. After all, now is when everything is getting started." Cantabile replied, gaining a serious air.

"It's St Binah that's next right?" Arietta inquired.

"That's-" Both women froze when they heard the door close.

They both made their way over to the door and opened it, gazing out into the dark chapel. Walking away from them was one of the acolytes who, sensing the attention turned around and waved at her superiors before hurrying off to bed.

"Girls… honestly," Cantabile sighed, "if they're going to spend the night with their boyfriends, they should just go rather than try and sneak around all the time."

"What do you mean by that?" Arietta inquired.

"Nothing you need to worry about, kiddo."

"Well," Arietta continued ignoring the taunt, "there are worse things it could have been. At least it was just one of the acolytes."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that if I were you."

Asch closed the door to his bedroom and finally allowed himself to catch his breath. So stupid! He accidentally knocked the door that the two Oracle Knights had left open, closed. Luckily he had managed to get out of sight before either of the God-Generals had spotted him. But in spite of how close he had come to getting caught, it was definitely worth it.

"What do you think they meant by that when they said is next?" Luke asked as Asch crawled into bed.

'I don't know it could be a lot of things. If we're lucky, it's just where they're going to look for Ion next.'

'But they said something about –everything getting started- what do suppose that's all about.'

'To be honest I don't know…' Asch answered. 'But regardless, we need to assume the worst case scenario.'

'You don't mean…'

'I do. Worst case scenario, St. Binah is going to become the next Akzeriuth.'

'No! We can't let that happen! We need to find a way to stop it!' Luke protested.

'I know. Don't worry we will.' Asch reassured his sibling. 'But I'm not going to be able to do this alone anymore Luke. I'm going to need your help.'

'You mean like go back?'

'Yes. Most of your wounds should have healed by now. While you're in Yulia City, check with
Teodoro and see if there's anything about St. Binah falling in the Score. Then come and meet up with us.'

Luke was silent. He had grown comfortable in the safety of Asch's mind, and he found that he was reluctant to leave it. Luke fought back his apprehension. It had been easy enough to deal with things while in the sanctuary that Asch had created for him. Here he had only his own contempt for himself and his actions to deal with, while being surrounded by the support and faith Asch had in him. Outside, it wouldn't be nearly so friendly. He was nervous; he wasn't ready to face the others, their harsh judgment and the ruthless reality of the world on his own yet.

'I know it's hard,' Asch said softly, 'but you can't stay here forever. You have to take that first step on your own.'

'I know…' Luke replied.

'I believe in you…' Asch trailed off as he fell asleep.

Luke quieted and allowed his consciousness to slowly follow suit, a single thought lingering as he fell asleep.

He wondered if he could find it in him to believe in himself.
Thank you and...

Luke looked around but everywhere he looked was black. It wasn't the darkness brought on by the lack of light, but an empty void where no light existed at all. There was no ground, nor was there a sky. There were no definitions of any kind, just an endless black abyss.

Luke fought down his racing feelings. He had to move, he had to go save them. If he didn't hurry then people would get hurt! But he was scared, he didn't want to move. What if he fell? He would be left to fall forever in this immeasurable emptiness.

His hesitation got the better of him and he stayed fixed to the spot. No sooner had he made his decision, he began to sink. Luke struggled but that only made him sink faster. He looked down around his feet and he was no longer sinking into the darkness, it was the miasma! Luke suddenly looked up and everything wasn't black anymore. He was sinking in the miasma in the Qliphoth and Akzeriuth was sinking all around him.

People were reaching out, grabbing him as he fought against the miasma, begging him to save them. Their ragged cries and screams for help drowned him. He could feel their desperate grasps as they clung to his clothes, their cold lifeless skin brushing against his own as they dragged him down. No! Just leave me alone! I didn't- I can't- Luke fought and fought and fought but they wouldn't let go! He was sinking! He couldn't breathe! He-

Luke woke with a start, sitting up in bed, bringing his hand to his head when it started spinning from the sudden rush of blood. He sat for a moment allowing his breathing to slowly return to normal as he looked around.

He was back in Tear's room. The cot where Asch had slept had been put away, but he still recognized the paintings on the wall and the large window that overlooked the garden.

"Asch?" Luke tried, but got no response. He must still be asleep, which was very possible seeing as there was no way to tell what time of day it was down here, or how long he himself had been asleep before waking up.

"Master!" Mieu happily bounced onto the bed.

"Mieu." Luke acknowledged the little cheagle.

"I'm so happy you're awake! I was getting really worried when you wouldn't wake up."

"Thank you." Luke replied, "...and thank you for staying with me on the Tartarus. I'm sorry I didn't pay any attention to you then," he continued after a moment.

"That's okay," Mieu piped up, "Master wasn't feeling good back then too right?"

Luke smiled at the little cheagle's perceptiveness. "That's right, but I'm feeling better now."

Following his statement Luke removed some of the bandages to check his injuries. They were doing well, in fact, they were doing surprisingly well. Most of his cuts had completely faded and only some of the larger bruises still showed the tiniest traces of having ever existed at all. Mieu hopped onto the end table as Luke swung his arms around. He wasn't sore either, albeit a little stiff from the lack of movement over the past few days, otherwise, he was in pretty good shape.

In fact, he was in much better shape then he had expected, and he couldn't help but wonder if Tear
might have had something to do with it. Tear…Luke really didn't know what to do about the melodist. He was more than certain that she probably didn't want to have anything to do with him anymore, which was understandable enough, but he couldn't just up and leave without saying anything.

He let out a huge sigh. But that would mean he'd have to face her, which wasn't something Luke was sure he was ready for yet. What would he say? His hesitation bothered him. Luke was nervous about facing the others, their pitiless judgements still fresh in his mind, but of everyone, she was the one that frightened him the most. He was so afraid that she'd reject him, that she would abandon him; and yet at the same time he knew he couldn't get her involved anymore. He had betrayed her trust and faith in him enough already and it wasn't fair to even ask that of her. Then in that case, there was really only one thing to say…


"Sorry, what was that?" Luke inquired.

"Asch wanted me to tell you that he's sorry but he had something that was really really important to do. But he said he was going to come back and get you as soon as he was done." The young cheagle repeated.

Luke smiled at the little additions Mieu had chosen to make. "Thanks Mieu. But first, do you know where I can find Tear?"

"I think she's in the garden."

"Thanks," Luke replied as he stood up out of bed, "could you wait here? I'll be right back."

"Okay!" The little cheagle squeaked. Luke ruffled the fur on Mieu's head then proceeded to make his way out towards the garden. As much as he didn't want to, as much as he feared it, he had to go face her.

You have to take that first step on your own.

I will.

Luke walked out the door and couldn't believe what he saw. In the middle of this city, lost amidst the poisonous miasma, there was a small garden. Enclosed by buildings on three sides, it was covered by a large glass dome that allowed the pale golden glow that bathed all of Yulia City to trickle through. The far wall was made entirely of glass, turning it into a huge window that looked out onto the residents of the lost city.

There, at the center of the garden, stood Tear. Facing away from where Luke had entered, her tan hair gently swayed as air moved through the small sanctuary. At her feet sat a bed of silvery white flowers that almost glowed against the green grasses that grew among them. Upon hearing him approach she turned around, her piercing blue eyes meeting his own.

"Luke, you're awake." She said softly. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine, thanks to you." Luke replied.

"It was nothing." Tear broke Luke's gaze by looking down at the flowers that had bloomed at her
feet. An awkward silence settled over them.

"So…what is this place?" Luke finally asked.

"This was one of my favourite places when I was little." Tear replied. "These flowers, Selenias, are the only flowers that bloom here in the Qliphoth. Since the Outer Lands cover the sky, not much light gets through. I've always loved that about them, the way they become so much more beautiful in darker times."

"Tear, I-"

"Can I ask you something?" Tear cut him off.

"What is it?"

"Why did you do it?" Tear looked straight at him, her sapphire eyes betraying her sorrow and confusion.

Tear watched as Luke sighed and broke her gaze, deeply contemplating the question she had just asked. She had thought it through for the past couple days, and the more she thought about it, the more it bothered her. The Luke she knew, the Luke she thought she knew… just wasn't like that. Sure he was irresponsible, reckless and whined more than she cared to deal with, but under all that she had discovered a good person at heart. Finding out that he had been the cause of Akzeriuth's destruction had shocked her to her very core and she had lashed out in response to such a deep betrayal of her trust.

If nothing else, she wanted him to tell her it had all been a huge misunderstanding, that he'd really had nothing to do with such a terrible tragedy. Her heart sank as the regret and remorse that swept over Luke told her she wouldn't be getting the answer she was hoping for.

"I never had any other friends before, not any real ones anyways." Luke said softly as he gazed up at the dome that covered the garden. "I mean there were lots of people in Baticul and all, but there was never anyone I ever got close to you know? They always looked at me differently. I may not be in line to the throne or anything, but I'm still a noble. I'm not supposed to 'fraternize with the commoners' as Father used to say."

Tear watched Luke in amazement. She had never seen this side of him before. He was always so carefree and bright, but now she saw something in him she never dreamed she'd ever see: he was lonely.

"But I was never unhappy." Luke continued gently. "I had Asch, and Guy too. But Asch is always busy up at the castle, and it's not really fair of me to monopolize all of Guy's time. Besides, Guy's a servant in my household, so Father never approved of our friendship…" He trailed off. "But then I met you and Ion and everyone else. You guys didn't treat me different or special because of my status, and I was really happy. Even when you would yell at me for doing something stupid, it made me happy. I was just glad that someone cared enough about me to scold me, and treat me like they would treat anyone else. So I decided; if there was ever anything I could do to protect you, that I would do it, without hesitation." Luke sighed and turned to look at Tear.

"It's funny," Luke continued, "sometimes I wonder if I was just deluding myself after all. I mean, no one really trusts me, and now everyone's left. But in spite of that, I don't regret wanting to protect you all."

"How did you know…?" Tear wondered.
"I know all that isn't an excuse for what happened," Luke continued, his eyes glimmering as he bordered on tears despite the gentle smile on his face. "I screwed up. And because of me, thousands of people are dead. Nothing I can do will ever change that; I can't go back and undo everything I've done. But I can't dwell on it forever either. If I do, more people will get hurt and it will be my fault again. I won't let that happen anymore. So all I can do for Akzeriuth is live on carrying the weight of all those lives that I destroyed, and I will do everything in my power to make sure something like that never happens again. It's the only way I know how to go on…"

"Luke…"

Luke knelt down among the flowers and gently fingered the white petals of the blossoms. "I won't ask for your trust, or for your forgiveness, because I don't deserve either."

"Then why did you come?" Tear asked softly.

Luke picked one of the flowers and walked right up to Tear. "I guess, there was just something that I had to say before I left." He replied as he gently brushed her hair back and tucked the blossom behind her ear.

"What was that?" Tear asked hesitantly, a bit flustered by how close Luke was standing.

But Luke didn't answer her, he simply looked her straight in the eye and gave her one last gentle smile. Tear couldn't remember how long they stayed there, frozen in that moment, but without another word, Luke turned around and walked away.

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The gentle sounds of the sea, the waves against the side of the boat, the birds as they flew through the air, were drowned out by the dull roar of conversation in the dinning hall. The sailors there didn't mind. The laughter and mirth that the group at the far end of the room shared brought smiles to their faces.

"…we called his name and he was so startled, he just about fell out of the tree. I don't think I've ever seen anyone cling to a branch quite so desperately." Guy finished, leaving everyone in stitches except for Asch who was the subject of Guy's latest childhood story.

"Man you two had one crazy childhood." Anise commented as she helped herself to seconds. While not as good as some of the meals she had enjoyed in Baticul, the food on the ferry to Kaitzur was really something else.

"I remember that one," Natalia chuckled, "it was around the time Van became his instructor. By the time we found him, he had missed his lesson." Asch mumbled something or another about not being informed about anything and everyone started laughing again.

"Do you know any other good ones?" Anise inquired excitedly.

"Hmmmm…" Guy contemplated it for a moment.

"Tell another one about me and I lock you in a room with the maids when we get back." Asch threatened the blonde seated next to him.

"Well how about the one with Luke and the flowers?"

"I don't think we've heard that one." Ion offered.
"Oh great." Luke mumbled. What about their embarrassing childhood stories was so fascinating to these people?

"Well," Guy began, "it would have been back when Luke was still pretty young. One of the maids that took care of him was leaving. She had gotten a job closer to her family or something, but she wasn't going to be coming back. Now Luke was pretty upset and it took us awhile to explain it to him, but he eventually got the gist of the fact that she wasn't returning. So the day she was to leave, we brought him along to say good bye and- Hey!" Guy was interrupted as Asch bit the piece of meat off the fork that Guy had unknowingly been swinging in his face.

"Stop playing with your food." Asch stated as everyone burst into laughter. Guy discarded his fork and procured another before continuing.

"Anyways, where was I?"

"The maid was leaving," Anise eagerly provided.

"Right. Luke wanted to say goodbye, so he walked up to her. She knelt down but before she could do anything, he pulls this flower out of the planter, roots and all, and puts it behind her ear, then he gives her a hug. Now the rest of us are all just watching worried about how she was going to react having this clump of dirt stuck in her hair, but she loved it. The funniest thing is, I walked her down to the port so she could catch the ferry, and it turns out she was allergic to those flowers. She sneezed the whole way down, but she wouldn't take the flower out of her hair."

"Awww that's so cute!" Anise piped up. She just loved listening to stories like that.

"It was. After that it sort of became a tradition. Every time one of the female servants left, the boys would each put a flower in her hair. After awhile, the whole thing sort of took on a meaning of its own. It."

"Can we stop with the childhood stories?" Luke interrupted as he stood up from the table.

"I'll second that," Asch agreed as he too picked up his empty plate.

"Aww you two aren't any fun." Anise pouted but still followed suit along with all the others.

Tear looked down at the garden and gently cupped her hands in front of her, catching the blossom as it fell from her hair. Her heart was in her throat. Why was she so upset? Luke hadn't even said anything to her, he had run away instead. Or had he? Tear gently fingered the blossom in her hand, wondering what Luke could have possibly wanted to tell her. But in the end, would it even matter? Whatever it was, he decided wasn't important enough to say, so why was she getting so worked up about it?

No, that wasn't it at all. She was so stupid and so blind! So desperate to cling to her world of right and wrong, that she refused to consider the grays in between. Luke had done something terrible, something most people would consider unforgivable, and to her that had meant Luke himself was unforgivable. But that wasn't the case at all! He was still the same Luke, though his innocence was tainted and his smile had become sad, he was the same person she had come to know and treasure. But in spite of that, Tear couldn't bring herself to shake off her lingering doubts. She couldn't just ignore everything that had happened. He had destroyed Akzeriuth, when he had been sent to protect it.
But that didn't automatically make him a bad person. If anything, after all was said and done, it had made him stronger. The darkness had come, and Luke had blossomed. He wasn't running away from his problems anymore, and his actions just now had spoken louder than any of the words she had ever spoken.

But by the time she had realized it, Luke was already gone.

"Did putting a flower in a girl's hair really mean something?" Tear inquired as she helped Guy clean up the table. The others had all already left.

"It sure did." He replied. "You would never catch Asch putting a flower in Natalia's hair like that. After all those years of it being a tradition, it sort of became tied to all the feelings that went along with it you know?"

"What did it eventually come to mean?" She asked.

Guy looked up at her and smiled. "It came to mean 'Thank you.' " He said softly.

Thank you... and goodbye.
Luke softly closed the door to the garden behind him, and leaned back against it. He was doing the right thing, wasn't he? It wasn't fair of him to ask Tear to get involved anymore, especially after his stupidity had almost gotten her killed, along with everyone else. Not to mention what he had probably put her through emotionally. Dammit! Luke pounded his fist against the door. If it was the right thing to do, why did he feel so awful?

Luke took a deep breath to calm himself down and made his way across the room. Regretting it now wouldn't serve any purpose, and he intended to make good on what he had said to Tear. He wasn't going to let anything happen to St. Binah, and accomplishing that depended on him working as fast as possible and catching up with Asch and everyone else.

Luke suddenly realized that he hadn't asked Asch what they were going to do next. Not that he had any concerns about being able to locate them. Even now with Asch sleeping; he could pick out the general direction in which his sibling could be found. The sensation wasn't entirely new to him, but at the same time, it sort of was. It amazed him just how much stronger their connection had become in the month since Choral Castle, and even in just the past couple days. That knowledge made him feel a lot better. Even though they were further apart, he still had Asch's support. Knowing that, facing the world became a little bit easier.

"Master!" Mieu hopped across the room as Luke approached.

"Hey Mieu," Luke replied, allowing the cheagle to take a spot on his shoulder. "You ready to go?"

"Go? Where are we going?" Mieu inquired as Luke gathered his sword and the few supplies that Asch had left for him. Yulia Road came up somewhere near Daath, if Luke recalled what Asch had said correctly. So the meagre supplies Asch had been able to spare should be more than enough to get him there, but he'd have to pick up some more if he planned to continue beyond that.

"We're going to go visit Teodoro." Luke answered as he took one last look around the room. The absence of his coat made him feel like something was missing so he checked extra carefully, but didn't find anything amiss. "Then," Luke continued as he began to make his way down the stairs, "We're going to go meet up with Asch and the others."

"But what about Tear? Isn't she coming?" Mieu's question caused Luke to stop in the middle of the steps.

"No." He replied as he gently set his hand down on the railing.

"How come?"

"Because she doesn't have any reason to come with us anymore… besides, this is her home, and she's been away for awhile. I'm sure she has lots of friends and people to catch up with." Luke continued down the stairs.

"Okay, mieuuu." The young cheagle's ears sagged.

"Don't worry; we'll still be meeting up with the others." Luke offered.

Luke opened the door and stepped out of Tear's house, hesitating as he closed it behind him. No, he wouldn't turn back. In spite of everything he would have to face, everything he would have to go through, he wouldn't put her through it. Not for the sake of his own selfishness. This really was
goodbye.

"But Master, how do you know where they are?" Mieu asked, breaking Luke away from his thoughts as he closed the door. Luke smiled.

"That's a secret."

Seeing Yulia City through his own eyes was amazing. He vaguely remembered his first impressions of the city, and realized just how skewed they had been by his unsound state of mind. Now it seemed so much more alive and alight with the Dawn Age technology from which it was built. Luke followed a path that should have been completely foreign to him as he made his way to the conference center.

It wasn't until he had arrived at the doors that Luke realized he had walked the entire way from memory, or rather from Asch's memory, while his mind contemplated other matters. But Luke shook off the rather dreary thoughts that had been occupying his attention, he had work to do.

The conference room was exactly as it had been when he had been here before, though Teodoro sat in a different seat, he was once again alone, this time reading from a book. He looked up when he heard the young noble enter.

"Hello." Luke stated as he made his way towards the mayor. Teodoro eyed him strangely for a moment.

"Ah, you must be the twin brother." He finally said.

"That's right, my name is Luke."

"It's good to see that you are well."


"Come, come now young man there is no need to be so upset. You did just as the Score foretold."

"Was Akzeriuth's destruction really in the Score?"

"It was. While it pained me to see the city fall, we dare not deviate from the Score, else we lose the prosperity that was promised to us." Teodoro replied.

"Does the Score speak of any other lands falling?"

"Why would you ask that?"

"I'm worried." Luke stated, "With Akzeriuth's Sephiroth gone, aren't the surrounding lands like St. Binah in danger as well?"

"There is no cause for such concerns. The Score doesn't foretell the fall of any more lands. St. Binah is still supported by the power of the other eight Sephiroth, so do not worry, the remaining Outer Lands are safe."

Luke thought on what Teodoro had said for a moment. From the sounds of things, maybe the God-Generals really did have something else in mind for St. Binah. Though that in itself was cause
enough for concern, at the very least it didn't look like it was going to fall. But then just what was Master Van's purpose behind Akzeriuth's destruction?

"You hear that, Asch?" Luke prodded his sibling, but once again got no response. That was odd. Enough time had passed that he should be up by now. Luke shrugged it off, maybe Asch had taken the opportunity to get some extra rest. After all, he had been supporting Luke's own consciousness for the past few days, and though he certainly didn't say anything, it had probably worn him out. But Luke still couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right.

"Are you sure that the other passage rings will be safe?" Luke inquired.

"The passage rings are very heavily guarded by the Order, as well as by a protection put in place by Yulia herself." Teodoro replied.

"The Yulian seals?"

"That's correct… You're quite knowledgeable, not many people are privy to such knowledge." Teodoro eyed Luke suspiciously.

"It's something that Ion told me once." Luke lied. "But how are you so sure that they won't be broken? I mean the Albertesque seal has already fallen, right?"

"Don't worry so," Teodoro placed a comforting hand on Luke's shoulder. "The knowledge of how to open the Yulian seals was lost long ago. Irregardless of that, the Score does not foretell the fall of any more of the Outer Lands."

Luke let out a worried sigh. "May I use the Yulia Road? I'm sorry, but I just won't feel comfortable until I've checked it myself."

"Certainly," Teodoro replied, "go see with your own eyes that your fears are groundless."


"The Yulia Road comes up in the Aramis Springs near Daath. But the springs themselves are quite treacherous, be careful along the way." Teodoro said to Luke who was making his way out.

Luke waved back. "Thanks, I will."

Luke didn't quite know what to expect when he stepped onto the large glyph, but whatever he was expecting, the Yulia Road turned out to be completely different. He had only closed his eyes for a second as he stepped onto the glowing circle, but when he opened them again, he found himself standing in a small spring under the shade of a large tree. Luke was so surprised he fell over into the water, sending Mieu, who had been sitting on his shoulder, tumbling into a nearby bush.

"Sorry Mieu," Luke apologized as he sat up. "Hey… I'm not wet."

"Wow!" the young cheagle poked his head out of the bush. Luke stood up and stepped out of the spring; he was completely dry. Luke knelt down and ran his hand suspiciously through the water, but found it to be an otherwise normal spring. He stood up again and shook his hand dry.

"How does Yulia come up with this stuff?" He wondered aloud, as he went and helped Mieu out of the bush, and allowed the cheagle to take a spot on his head.
"It's amazing isn't it? Yulia must have been really smart!"

"She couldn't have been that bright, otherwise she could have just saved herself the trouble and had it come up on dry land." Luke commented. "But Yulia's intelligence aside, which way do you suppose we're headed?" It only took Luke a second to locate the direction Daath was in, assuming that's where Asch still was, but unfortunately that direction led him straight into a rock wall, so they would have to find another way.

"That way!" Mieu pointed towards the entrance to a cavern. It was as good a direction as any, so Luke started off that way. Once they were out of the springs they could finally head for Daath, and that couldn't come fast enough. Despite his fear of facing the others, Asch's continued state of unresponsiveness was starting to worry him. The sun was already overhead; he should have been up hours ago, and Luke doubted it was just the after effects of the strain they had put on their connection recently. The sooner they got to Daath, the better.

Aramis springs proved to be a veritable maze of connecting caverns that wound through the mountains. Just as Teodoro had warned, the path was treacherous and there were several places Luke had to pay careful attention to his footing. The sheer number of springs and streams kept the rocks wet, making them slippery, a problem only compounded by the moss that grew in abundance in the dim caverns.

Luke passed the time by talking with Mieu and he was surprised by how interesting of a conversation he could have with the young cheagle. Though Mieu shared some rather unique views on the various topics they had covered, it was interesting to see how the little creature saw the world and its problems.

"Are you cold, Master?" Mieu inquired when Luke let out an involuntary shudder.

"A little," Luke said with a soft chuckle. It wasn't so bad out in the sun, but it was pretty cool in the caves where the water quickly swept away the heat that managed to penetrate this deep.

"Asch got rid of your old coat." Mieu provided.

"That's okay, I can just imagine the shape it was in." Luke chuckled to himself, "I can pick up another one the next time we're in Baticul."

"But-" Mieu's sentence was cut off by the rumble that came from the cheagle's belly. Luke laughed.

"You hungry?"

"Just a little," Mieu admitted. Luke vaguely wondered when the last time the little creature had eaten was. The grasses it was so fond of didn't exactly grow in abundance in the Qliphoth. "Maybe Guy will make that really yummy supper for us when we find him!" Mieu added. Luke grew quiet.

"You'll have to ask him when we see him." Luke replied softly.

That's right… Guy wasn't going to be there when they met up with everyone. Luke and Mieu continued in silence. The fight between Guy and Asch had been intense, and Luke still couldn't get over how strongly they hated each other. It left him to wonder how many of these fights had gone on behind his back over the years. But then when he was around, they never showed any signs of it at all. Just how much resentment had they buried away for his sake? Still…Luke wondered where
his best friend might have gone. *Somewhere I'm wanted.*

He wouldn't have gone to Master Van would he? But then that was always a possibility wasn't it? Even though Asch would never say it, he certainly thought it, and suspected Guy all the more because of it. He had been Master Van's ally in helping kidnap Asch, who was to say they weren't still working together now? Luke didn't like that thought; he didn't want to think that Guy would want to have anything to do with whatever Master Van was planning, but even as he searched through his own memories, he realized just how often he had come across Guy and Master Van talking before his lessons. But Guy wasn't like that… was he?

*Somewhere I'm wanted.*

"Master watch out!"

The rock under Luke's foot gave way and in spite of Luke's last minute attempt to maintain his balance, he found himself falling towards the pool of water below.

"Easy there." Luke opened his eyes at the sound of the familiar voice.

"Guy!" Luke exclaimed in surprise as the blonde helped him climb back up onto the path.

"Hey there Luke. You should watch where you're stepping, these paths are pretty nasty."

"What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't find anywhere else I belonged." Guy mumbled to himself.

"What was that?"

"Nothing important." Guy shook his head, "So, how are you feeling?"

"Much better thanks. But what are you doing all the way out here? I mean, how did you even know to come here?"

"Ouch. I come all the way out here to get you and that's the thanks I get?"

"I'm sorry. I just thought…" Guy gave him a pointed look, "No never mind. Thanks Guy."

"I'm sorry I didn't wait for you in Yulia City, I….no you know what, that's not important." Guy cut off his own thought leaving Luke curious as to what he had been about to say. He had a sneaking suspicion that it had to do with Asch. "So where are you headed?" Guy tried instead.

"Well I was going to start by finding a way out of here." Luke commented, unsure if he was ready to divulge the details of his plans just yet. He knew Asch had told him not to distrust Guy but…

"Would you mind if I joined you?" Guy asked with a chuckle.

"Of course we wouldn't mind!" Mieu piped up.

"Yeah," Luke added, "you came all the way out here for me after all."

"Sounds good to me. We're about halfway in or so, so there's still a bit of a trek before we get out." Guy commented, "You want to stop for a break before we keep going?"

"No, we should get out of here as soon as we can." Guy eyed Luke, surprised at his motivation, but decided not to inquire as to the cause.
"Alright then, let's head off."


"Yeah, what is it Guy?"

"I'm sorry for all that stuff I said back on the Tartarus."


"No, it's not okay," Guy protested. "Yeah, what you did was terrible, I won't deny that, but I still shouldn't have been so harsh with you. I mean, you're only seven years old. It's inevitable that you're going to make some mistakes along the way… but… I forgot that… I'm sorry." Guy finished with a deep bow.

"No, really Guy, it's okay." Luke smiled. He really was the same Guy. In spite of everything Luke had learnt about him recently, the darker sides of him that Luke had never seen before, he was still the kind-hearted person that had become his best friend, and Luke would have faith in him, if no one else would. "But there is something you could do for me." Luke added after a moment's thought.


"Could you fill me in on what everyone's been up to while I was out?"

Guy spent the next leg of their journey describing to Luke everything that had happened since Yulia City. While Luke already knew what had happened, having Guy tell him gave him something to fall back on in case he accidentally slipped and said something he otherwise shouldn't have known. Now all he needed to do was steal some time alone with Asch and he would have everything he'd learnt over the past couple days covered. Wait… Asch…Luke suddenly noticed how Guy had conveniently left out the parts where he and Asch had gotten into fights. Actually… come to think of it, he had yet to mention Asch at all. We, Jade, Natalia, Anise, Ion… but never Asch. Why was that?

"Hey Guy?" Luke interrupted once Guy had finished describing their encounter with Spinoza.

"What is it, Luke?"

"What's Asch been doing?"

"…He was with us." Guy answered after a moment of awkward silence. What was up? The way Guy said it… you'd think Guy was scarred he would be offended or something. Wait… that's what this was about! Guy didn't realize that he and Asch were on perfectly good terms with each other; after all, he thought that the last thing that had happened between them was their little… scuffle. No wonder he was walking on eggshells as far as Asch was concerned.

"Look…" Guy broke the tense silence, "I honestly don't know what the hell Asch thought he was doing but-"

Luke cut him off by shaking his head. "No it's okay Guy. I think I know why he did what he did, and it's alright."
"It's a good thing you do, because no one else can make heads or tails of him," Guy said with a sigh. "I'll never understand the two of you."

Luke just grinned, "So what did you guys do after you talked to Spinoza?" This was the part Luke really wanted to hear.

"There's actually not much else to tell. After that I left, so I don't know what they ended up doing." Guy replied.

"Why did you leave?"

"I was worried about you." Guy provided.

"You're lying." Luke shot back, looking Guy straight in the eye. Normally he wouldn't push the issue, but he wanted to hear Guy's side of the story. He knew Asch's side, and he understood why Asch's distrust was so harsh, but if he had noticed anything from that encounter, it was that Guy's hatred went almost as deep. Why?

"Why would you say that?" Guy laughed nervously.

"Because you won't look at me when you say it." Luke replied, but stopped prodding, instead continuing down the path. It seemed like there were still things Guy didn't trust him with either.

Guy followed, but the two of them continued in silence. It wasn't much longer before they finally reached the exit. It took them both a moment for their eyes to adjust to the sudden burst of sunlight, but when they did, they noticed a very familiar blue figure approaching them.

"Jade?" Guy walked up to the Colonel. Luke on the other hand froze to the spot, his heart sinking as he noticed that Jade was alone.

"Asch? Asch! Asch if you can hear me, answer me!" But still, Luke got no response. Now he knew something was wrong.

"My my," Jade pushed his glasses back up his nose, "I must say, when Asch told me to come here, you were the last people I was expecting to find." 

"Jade! Where are Asch and the others?" Luke asked.

"Oh? And how do you know that I was with them?" Jade eyed Luke suspiciously.

"You were together when you left Belkend, if you aren't with them now, you should still know where they are or where they were headed." Guy provided.

"Our young heir has been taken prisoner along with his princess and the Fon Master in Daath. I came in search of reinforcements, but I must say, this isn't what I was expecting." He added with a glance in Luke's direction.

"They took Asch, Natalia and Ion prisoner? Are they still trying to start a war?" Luke fought against his growing anger. No wonder he couldn't get in touch with Asch, he was probably unconscious in a cell somewhere.

"Now he's perceptive." Jade shot. Luke walked up to the Malkuth Colonel and looked straight into his piercing red eyes.

"I know you probably don't want to have anything to do with me, and rightfully so." Luke stated.
"You have no reason to trust me or to want to help me, so this may be presumptuous of me, but I'm going to ask for your help in rescuing my brother. We can't do it alone. If you want, after this, I'll leave and never bother you again." Luke finished.


"Okay then, let's head for Daath!" Luke said as he started down the road.


"What is it?" Luke stopped and turned around.

"Do you even know where Daath is?"

Crap, Luke had jumped the gun without even thinking. The faint sensation he got from Asch aside, he recognized the area from when they had passed through before, in the distance he could even see the valley where the bandits had attacked them. "It's this way right?" Luke pointed down the road in the direction he was heading.

"Yeah that's right, but how did you know?"

"Well I just figured you guys would stop me if I was heading the wrong way." Luke shrugged.

"Your dependence on others to correct you is exactly why you make mistakes." Jade pointed out. Luke shrunk back, he knew exactly what Jade meant by mistakes.

"I'm sorry." Luke said quietly, "You're right."

"No point in dwelling on the past now," Jade began down the road, "we've a future to worry about after all."

"Jade's right," Guy added. "We just have to do everything we can for now."

*Just do whatever you can do, even if it's just a little.*

Daath was just as amazing as Luke remembered it, though there were fewer people around since it was already getting close to supper time and most of the shops had closed up for the day. Not that it made a difference, now wasn't the time to be seeing the sights. Luke still couldn't contact Asch, which meant that he was either unconscious or… no he wouldn't even consider the alternative. Asch couldn't be dead. He may not have gotten a reply, but he could still sense his sibling's presence at the back of his mind. That had to mean something. Asch was alive, but beyond that, Luke couldn't tell.

"Jade?" Guy spoke up, breaking the silence that had brooded over them since they had departed from Aramis Springs.

"What is it Guy?"

"This has been bothering me for awhile now. What exactly happened here?"

"What do you mean by that?" Jade inquired.

"Well when you first met up with us, you said something about Asch being the one that sent you. Then you turn around and say that Asch was captured. And what about you? Weren't you with everyone? Why weren't you captured?"

"A valid point." Jade replied, a sly grin on his face. Really, if they weren't so amusing when they tried to play detective, it would be rather annoying.

"As amused as you seem to with all this," Luke interrupted, "If we're planning to rescue them, I'd like to know what we're heading into."

"Oh? That's quite the initiative you're taking there." Jade taunted, but Luke remained serious. No fun at all.

"Jade, why won't you tell us?" Guy's tone was equally serious.

"I'm afraid there isn't much to tell." Jade shrugged. "We were supposed to meet up with Ion and Anise first thing in the morning but we were ambushed in the Cathedral. Asch knew he was a target so he covered my escape telling me to go to Aramis Springs to get help."

"I wonder...do you think he knew you'd come after him?" Guy asked his best friend.

"Maybe." Luke lied. Asch had sent Jade to get him knowing full well Luke was already on his way. "What happened to Ion and Anise then?"

"Ion was captured but Anise also managed to escape. She's tracking down where they're being held as we speak." Jade provided. "Although, if you don't mind my asking, what happened to Tear?"

Luke was silent for a moment. "She stayed in Yulia City."

"Pity." Jade stated, "Her talents would have proven useful. Oh well, it can't be helped. That does of course mean that we'll have to be extra careful without a healer handy. No rash actions." He finished, his last comment directed at the red head.

Luke clenched his fists. He almost wished they'd come out and yell at him. It would be so much
easier than the subtle signs of distrust and constant reminders of how badly he'd screwed up. He knew he'd earned it, and while he had known no one would trust him, he hadn't expected it to hurt so much.

"There you are!" The three heard a familiar voice in the distance.

"Asch? How'd you get out so-" The Fon Master Guardian exclaimed, cut short when Luke turned around to face her. "Oh, it's you." She stated disappointedly. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm afraid these are all the reinforcements Asch sent us to fetch." Jade provided.

"Seriously? How'd he manage that?" She eyed the two boys, they were obviously the last two people in Auldrant she had expected to come to Asch's rescue. "I've got to wonder what the hell he's thinking telling us to get Luke though. So what's this? Round two?"

Luke ignored Anise's comment, looking off to the side. He distracted himself by trying to contact Asch as Anise continued her brutal taunting that she so cleverly interlaced within her report to Jade. Luke thought he had sensed Asch stir, but he still hadn't been able to get a reply. Damn it, just what had they done to him?

"Things aren't looking so good." Anise stated solemnly, deciding she'd had enough harassing Luke for the time being. He wasn't even paying attention anyways. "With Akzeriuth gone and Asch and Natalia missing, Kimlasca is blaming Malkuth for their deaths, saying they did it on purpose. Likewise sounds like Malkuth thinks Kimlasca was behind the destruction of Akzeriuth, and tensions are getting pretty high. If things go on much longer, we're going to have a major war on our hands."

"First things first, we need to rescue Asch, Natalia and Ion." Luke stated. "Even if we tried, we'd get nowhere in negotiations without them."


"I'm afraid that there's no way we'll succeed in averting a war without their assistance," Jade confirmed.

Anise sighed, "I guess I don't have much of a choice." She eyed Luke venomously, "just don't try anything."

"I won't," Luke replied as he brushed past her heading for the Cathedral.

No one was going to die because of his mistakes ever again.

They had made their way deep into the underground levels of Daath, and Luke was grateful they had Anise leading the way. The vast expanse below the Cathedral was as confusing as its upper levels had been, and Luke would have spent years searching the place had he been alone.

Anise's initial disgust had died down a bit, and she had actually spoken to him a few times in a somewhat civil manner, but it was clear she still didn't trust him. It was to be expected though, and Luke put up with it. Whether they trusted him or not, whether they'd acknowledge him or not, he still needed their help. Though he knew that neither Anise nor Jade was doing this for his benefit, he was still grateful.
They had managed to avoid the majority of the Oracle Knights they had come across, which would have been a much more impressive feat had there been more of them; but there weren't. In fact, the hallways were suspiciously empty. Anise explained that they were passing through the sleeping quarters for the majority of the soldiers, most of which were probably at supper. They would have to take an alternate path to get out though, since by the time they found and released the captives, the hallways would be swarming with them.

Anise hushed them as they approached an especially broad hallway buried deep below the main levels of the Chapel. The hallway itself looked just like any of the others, and if it hadn't been for the four Oracle Knights guarding two of the doors, there wouldn't have been any indicator that anything was suspicious at all. Really, they needed to learn to be more inconspicuous. Jade pushed his glasses up his nose; they may as well have labelled the room in which they had placed the captives. But obvious or not, they would still have to fight.

"Alright, Anise, Guy, you take the two on the right, Luke and I will handle the two on the left." Jade instructed.

"What about the other two?" Luke asked.

Jade looked at him curiously and stole another glance down the hall. He was right. At the very far end there were two more guards that Jade had dismissed. They were far enough away not to be a threat, but on second thought, they would inevitably get involved once they heard the commotion.

"Looks like a free for all." Guy commented as he drew his sword.

"Sounds good to me," Luke drew his as well. It felt odd to hold his own sword; then again, this would be an interesting chance to see just what he had managed to pick up from fighting with Asch.

Just as Jade had predicted, as soon as the battle started, the remaining two guards joined in the chaos and made it six against four. Luckily for them, their group had a clear advantage in skill and the battle wasn't especially difficult. In fact, Jade found himself observing the proceedings far more than he should be.

One guard fell, then another, there were now four left. It was intriguing. Something was different about Luke all of a sudden, but Jade just couldn't put his finger on it. They had travelled a long ways together, and over that time, Jade had picked up on each person's unique fighting style. It was crucial on the battlefield to be able to predict how your allies would react, and then act accordingly. It could mean the difference between life and death after all, so Jade had made it a point to remember. Their usual patterns, their favourite skill sets, how they moved, they way they reacted, Jade had memorized it all. But Luke was suddenly different. It was almost as if he was moving more like Asch.

Jade sidestepped a knight's sword, he had been lost in thought too long it seemed. He retaliated with his spear, piercing through a weak spot in the armour. Now there were only three left. Jade glanced at the battlefield. He had lost sight of Luke, no matter, now wasn't the time. Jade unleashed his fonic arte, the wind forcing the guards back, but not doing nearly as much damage as he would have liked. Their thick metal armour protected them from the wind's sharp blades. Metal armour? That gave Jade an idea.

Perhaps third fonons weren't very effective, but he'd wager that metal would conduct fifth fonons rather nicely. Jade prepared to cast the arte, but there was something peculiar. For whatever reason, there was an absence of fifth fonons in the air. Where had they gone? Jade reached out, and then noticed them gathering. They were behind him.
"Bring all to ash and ruin."

Jade spun around fast enough to catch sight of the red head as he finished the arte. The fifth fonons crashed down, crippling the remaining guards.

Luke's long red hair settled down around him as he slowly let out a breath allowing the remaining fonons to dissipate. Impossible; Jade watched the young noble suspiciously as he re-sheathed his blade. Had Jade not known better, he would have thought the two of them had pulled that switching trick of theirs. He simply couldn't grasp how it was possible. That was no beginner's arte. Even if training had been the reason those two had been continuously sneaking off at night, there was no way Luke could have progressed that much in the short time since he'd known the boy, even under Asch's tutelage. Jade took a brief moment to settle his thoughts; those two were becoming more interesting by the moment.

The question then remained, how long had Luke possessed such knowledge of fonic artes, or rather, how long had he possessed such control over fonons? Perhaps Luke wasn't as untrained as he had been led to believe. However, if that was the case, what did it mean for Akzeriuth? The chances that Luke had accidentally caused a hyperresonance with another seventh fonist went down exponentially if Luke had the capacity to control fonons to the extent he had just witnessed. Had it been on purpose then? Had Luke known that the destruction would take place, even if it had been in the hope of some perceived benefit? It was certainly something Luke would be inclined to do, to jump into matters, not giving any thought as to the consequences. But something still didn't sit right, and it bothered him; it bothered him a lot. Nothing had ever evaded his perception this well for this long, especially not something so crucial to the matters at hand. Asch knew something, of that much he was certain, but whatever it was, he was keeping it to himself.

Luke couldn't resist a small grin of satisfaction at his success. It hadn't been as hard as he expected it to be, though it had easily taken him double or triple the time Asch could have pulled it off in. After the fight with the bandits, Luke had taken advantage of the remaining trip to Daath by getting Asch to give him a crash course in fonic artes and Asch had happily gone into it in great detail for him. In the end, it had been from feeling how Asch tied the fonons together that helped it all click; after all, it felt the same as if he'd been the one to do it himself. He had really only managed to pick up on a couple of the ones Asch knew from their subsequent battles with monsters along the way, and of those, he could only remember the one with the shortest incantation; but Luke was still proud of himself.

"Nice Luke," Guy commented as he put his sword away, "since when do you know fonic artes?"


"You got Asch to teach you, didn't you?"


"Well good for you. Now let's go meet up with the others, shall we?" Guy said indicating Anise and Jade who were already making their way towards the doors the Oracle Knights had been guarding.

Finally, now he could see Asch again. It was so strange, even though it didn't feel like they'd been apart that long, the last time Luke had actually seen Asch, was when they had fought in Yulia City, and that seemed like a lifetime ago. But as Guy and the others continued, Luke spotted something out of the corner of his eye.

Luke bent down to check it out and noticed a set of keys attached to the guard's belt loop. Luke
removed them; they must be to open the doors.

"Hey, the doors are open." Luke heard Anise comment as she entered one of the rooms. Weird; Luke held the key ring suspiciously. Oh well, he pocketed them anyways, who knew when they might come in handy. If nothing else, it would frustrate someone to no end when they couldn't find their keys.

Luke joined Guy in the room across from the one Anise and Jade had entered. It seemed like your typical room, bookshelves lined one of the walls and several tables were set out. On the other side was a chair and a few couches, on one of which was sleeping the young princess. Hardly the cells they had been expecting.

"You gonna wake her up?" Luke asked the blonde.


Luke walked over to the couch and gave her a gentle shake. After a moment she blinked sleepily and looked up at him. Her face lit up and she smiled warmly, but it quickly faded as she realized it wasn't who she thought it had been.

"Luke."

"Sorry. I'm afraid so." He replied gently, offering her a hand to help her stand up.

"I'm fine." She replied coldly and proceeded to sit up on her own. "What are you doing here?"

"We came to rescue you." Luke replied.

"I find that hard to believe." Natalia shot back coldly. "Come to see what else you can screw up?"

"Ouch that's harsh." Guy mumbled in the background.

"Why don't you just-"

"Luke!" Ion's voice came from behind them and cut Natalia off. Anise and Jade followed him in and they gathered around the couch where Natalia was sitting. "I'm glad to see you're feeling better."


"I'm fine. They've been holding us here in attempts to antagonize the situation between Kimlasca and Malkuth." Ion provided.

"Yeah," Guy interjected, "we've heard."

"Have any of the God-Generals or Commandant Grants been around?" Jade asked sternly. This may not be the best place to be talking.

"No, not to my knowledge." Natalia provided.

"Really?" Ion inquired, "I could have sworn I'd heard Van earlier today."

"Oh? I must not have been paying attention then." Natalia shrugged. "Either way we shouldn't dawdle. Whether they've been by or not, they're bound to come around sooner or later."

"Natalia raises a good point. Let's continue discussions once we've made it back to the Tartarus."
Jade agreed.

"Wait a second, where's Asch?" Luke demanded.

"He's not here." Mieu commented.

"I'm afraid he's been locked up elsewhere." Ion provided.

"Why?"

"Why?" Anise spoke up. "I'd say because he annihilated about half a squad of Oracle Knights before they managed to get him under control."

"Yeah that sounds like him," Guy commented, "never goes quietly."

"No he doesn't," Luke agreed, though his statement was followed by an awkward silence. Why was everyone looking at him?

"So do you know where they're keeping him?" Guy asked Anise.

"Who do you think you're talking to?" Anise protested.

"Well then," Guy chuckled, "You lead the way."

The room where Asch was imprisoned seemed inconspicuous enough from the outside, but once they'd entered, it was clearly different. Unlike the first two rooms, this one was obviously designed to hold prisoners. They found Asch at the far end of the room, completely restrained. His feet chained to the wall near the floor, and his arms were chained above his head. His crimson hair fell in his face as his binds held him upright despite his state of unconsciousness.

Everyone fell completely silent, their eyes all on the captive's sibling. What would he do? After everything that had happened in Yulia City… how would Luke react? Asch had been openly cruel, without giving any sort of explanation for it, and it couldn't have been easy on his twin, no matter how much Luke deserved it.

The air around Luke as he approached Asch was serious, and everyone was tense. Guy recalled what Luke had said in Aramis Springs, but did he really mean it? Like, did Luke really understand what Asch had done, and was okay with it? Or had those words been said solely for his benefit? He guessed there was only one way they were going to find out. Guy found himself secretly hoping Luke would let Asch have it, and if he did, Guy certainly wasn't going to be the one to intervene.

Luke walked up to Asch and positioned himself directly in from of his older sibling. Asch simply...hung there, for lack of a better word. When attempting to wake him up didn't produce any results, Luke gave him a mental shove. Slowly but steadily Asch began to stir. He cracked his eyes open and blinked lazily a few times before noticing who was in front of him.

Everyone in the room held their breath.

Luke's seriousness melted into a devilish grin. "Finally!" he exclaimed. Asch just stared at him, still not completely alert from his prior lack of consciousness. "It's about time you didn't make a grand entrance!"

Asch blinked confusedly a couple times before he burst out laughing and was quickly followed by
Luke. Asch was just so relieved to see him. Not just because he needed help getting out of his current dilemma, but because he could see Luke. Luke stood before him laughing, and he was okay. He wasn't unconscious or depressed or bordering downright insanity, but laughing, filled with the light Asch had known for the past seven years. And for the first time since they had left Baticul, he saw Luke smile, genuinely smile. Seeing Luke as his usual self made Asch happier than anything else. So while he was just as confused by Luke's statement as the awestruck group before him, he couldn't help but laugh.

"Seriously," Asch finally managed between chuckles, "what the hell are you talking about?"

"Well every time we get separated, you always make a grand entrance when you show up again. In the Cheagle Woods, in the port in Baticul, and then in Yulia City," Luke ticked off the instances on his fingers. "You always get to be the one to come in and save everyone!"

"Alright genius," Asch taunted unable to wipe the smile off his face, "if it's your turn to play hero, how do you plan to get out of this?" Asch tugged on the chain that was attaching him to the wall, showing that it was firmly implanted and wouldn't break.

"Oh dear," Natalia spoke up realizing the problem. "We'll need to find the keys."

"Man!" Anise moaned, "They could be with anyone!"

"Well? What's the plan?" Asch inquired noticing the sudden smug grin on Luke's face.

Luke didn't reply but simply reached into his pocket, pulling out a set of keys that he twirled tauntingly around his finger.

"Okay show off," Asch grinned. Even he could tell that Luke was thoroughly enjoying every moment of this. "Now can you get me down from here?" Luke caught the keys he was twirling and helped Asch down. He stumbled and Luke caught him, offering his shoulder as support while the blood returned to Asch's extremities.

"Are you going to be okay to move?" Luke inquired after a moment.

"Yeah." Asch stood up straight, rubbing his wrists, sore as they were from the hours of pressure imposed by his restraints.

"Okay good, because it probably won't be long before reinforcements show up."

"You're right, let's get out of here."

"Clever little rats." Dist commented as he examined the empty restraints.

"They got away," Sync commented. "Looks like someone didn't take much care in locking them up."

"Oh shut up, putting him down here was Cantabile's idea, not mine!" Dist fumed.

"And who was the one who wanted him for experiments and insisted on using the restraints instead of a cell like any normal prisoner?" Sync taunted.

"It wouldn't have mattered anyways," Dist stated. "These were unlocked. Someone helped him escape."
"Maybe it was the other one." Sync slyly suggested.

"Oooo" Dist cackled at the thought, "this may work out better than I had planned after all. Sync, I'm going after them."

"Be my guest, they can't have gotten far. Just remember that if you volunteer to go after them, the failure is on your shoulders." Sync replied.

"I won't fail! They'll never defeat my glorious creations!"

"They won't have to if you don't get moving." Sync taunted.

"Oh shut up!"

"Hey Guy," the Fon Master guardian spoke up as they walked through the outskirts of Daath.

"What's up Anise?"

"Maybe you could explain something to me," She replied.

"What's that?" Guy inquired. Anise just gave a pointed look in the direction of the twins who were walking ahead of them. The two red heads were lost in their own little world, chatting happily about Score knows what.

"I'm confused, what does Anise want to know?" Mieu spoke up from his perch on Tokunaga's head.

"I just don't get it," Anise provided. "I mean, between Luke in Akzeriuth and Asch in Yulia city, you'd think that one of them would be angry or upset."

"You'll learn pretty quickly that it's completely pointless to try and understand those two," Guy commented. "Most of the time, it's easiest to just go with it."

"Well I'm just happy to see that they're getting along," Ion commented.

"Perhaps," Natalia spoke up, "but this isn't like back at the manor where they tended to make up with out anyone being the wiser. Neither of them could have possibly spoken to each other before now. If nothing else, Asch needs to give Luke a good stern talking to."

"I wouldn't be overly concerned," Jade shrugged. "If they're both fine with everything that's happened, I don't see any reason we should be getting worked up over it."

"Jade's right," Guy agreed, "Besides, there'll be much more to worry about travelling through these mountains at night."

"Oh I wouldn't worry too much about that," A voice towards the side caught their attention. "You won't need to go through the mountains once you're dead."

"Dist," Jade stated, as the God-General and his floating chair descended upon the group. "I should have figured as much. No one else could possibly make such a tacky entrance."

"Shut up! What could someone as disgraceful as yourself possibly know?"
"More than someone like you, I'm sure."

"Well you can laugh all you like, but I'm not interested in you today." Dist brushed off the insult as he scanned the group.

"Guys!" Asch and Luke ran back to join the rest of the group, quickly noticing the God-General that had their attention.

"Ah, there you are my little lab rats," Dist said as he noticed the boys.

"Lab rats? What does he mean by that?" Anise inquired.

"Tsk. Tsk," Jade taunted playfully. "You two were messing around in the lab at Choral Castle weren't you?"

"Maybe," the boys both grinned.

"Honestly you two…" Guy shook his head.

"What's this about Choral Castle?" Natalia inquired.

"Hey! Stop ignoring me!" Dist protested.

"Did you hear anything?" Jade asked tauntingly.

"Nope," Asch replied, deciding to join in on the fun.

"Must have just been a fly in my ear," Jade shrugged.

"I've had just about enough of you!" Dist fumed in his chair. He snapped his fingers, and almost out of nowhere came a huge fon machine.

How they hadn't noticed its presence before now, the group would never know. The fon machine easily stood twice their height and made the most atrocious noise as it moved. Its limbs needed grease, and lots of it. It was almost as gaudy as its creator, bulky, slow and painted a myriad of mismatching colours. But in spite of this, the several weapon systems built into it, kept the thing from becoming a complete joke.

"Oh you have got to be kidding me." Guy almost rolled his eyes.

"Ha ha!" Dist laughed as he hovered about foot above ground, his eyes gleaming with pride at his latest creation that was now standing next to him. "Afraid aren't you? Terrified. Struck speechless in awe of the beauty and grace that I have created. Behold, my beloved Barelow XI! Consider yourselves privileged, not many get to perish at the hands of my super, ultra, amazing, one of a kind- Hey!"

Dist was cut off by his own creation and forced to retreat several feet as the machine swung around, one of its limbs nearly colliding with the God-General. The group had already engaged the thing.

"Over here you oversize scrap heap!" Asch called, he and Luke drawing its attention.

"What do you think you're doing?!" Dist cried, as Guy climbed up the back of the machine. It only took him a moment to reach the power source and yank it out, leaving a mess of broken wires and electronics. Dist's beloved Barelow XI buckled under itself and went crashing down to the ground.
"That was easy enough," Guy said as he rejoined Jade and the others who were guarding Ion.

"You give that back!" Dist demanded, his face red with anger. Guy simply grinned and waved the broken piece of fon machine tauntingly before throwing it with all his might into the nearby woods.

"I'll make you regret-"

"Hmm, what's this?" Luke, who had wandered around behind the infuriated Dist, plucked a strange glowing stone from the back of Dist's chair. As soon as the artefact was removed, Dist's chair crashed, the legs smashing upon impact sending the eccentric God-General flying a few feet, face first into a pile of dirt.

"What do you have there Luke?" Asch inquired.

"I don't know, Dist had it in some kind of device on the back of his chair." Luke replied, still staring at the stone. It had stopped glowing, and Luke's interest had somewhat diminished. Now it just looked like your average rock, but it was too perfectly shaped to be something natural.

"Why you lousy-" Dist barely managed to speak he was so mad.

"Pass it here," Asch spoke up.

"Return that at once!" Dist launched himself towards Luke. Luke grinned and tossed it to Asch. Dist jumped for it, but it passed clear over his outstretched hand and was caught by the second sibling. Dist redirected his attention.

"You give that back or I'll…" Dist threatened as he stormed towards Asch.

"Here Jade, you take a look," Asch tossed the stone to the Colonel as Dist flailed in attempt to intercept it.

Dist was so furious he couldn't even form words anymore. That still didn't stop him from storming towards Jade though. Jade wore the most evil and amused grin any of them had ever seen. He was so proud of those two right now.

"Here, Luke," Jade threw the stone back to the young noble who was fighting to keep his laughter under control. Asch too wore an amused grin and everyone else could only shake their heads as the three continued their game of keep-away with the enraged God-General.

"Just you wait!" Dist threatened after a good ten minutes of running in circles in attempts to reclaim whatever Luke had taken. "I'm putting this down in my revenge journal!"

The God-General stormed over to the remnants of his chair. The legs were a splintered mess and the seat was bent out of shape. It took him several minutes to pry open the hidden compartment but he was finally able to extract his beloved journal.

"See! Now you'll all-" Dist stopped. A breeze blew across the empty road as a group of people were barely visible beyond the horizon.

"I'll get you all! You'll see! You'll regret the day you crossed Dist the Rose!" Dist screamed into the sunset.

"Are you sure this is okay? He won't come after us?" Natalia inquired of Jade as the echoes of Dist's threat faded with the last of the day's light.
"It'll be just fine," Jade replied.
The sun was just starting to peek up over the horizon when a thoroughly exhausted group steered the Tartarus out of the port near Daath. They had travelled straight through the night, only stopping for short intervals to allow Ion a chance to rest. Though Dist had been easily thwarted, the reinforcements he was bound to call wouldn't be so easy to deal with, and they wanted to put as much distance between them and the Order's headquarters as was humanly possible.

After sailing for a few hours, they had taken shelter in a cove along the northern edge of the continent just south of Daath, and gotten some much deserved rest. Now, the sun was clear overhead and Asch quietly leaned back against the railing on the Tartarus' deck, enjoying the sounds of the sea and the cool breeze that swept up off the water.

Beside him Luke also stood in silence, watching the birds as they flew to and from their nests in the nearby cliffs. Words weren't needed; they simply enjoyed each other's presence as they waited for everyone else to wake up.

"So what's next?" Asch finally asked as he watched the cotton clouds float by overhead.

"I don't know," Luke replied. "From the looks of things, St. Binah isn't in any danger."

"So says Teodoro," Asch shot back. "I don't know… something about this seems off. I wouldn't put it past him to have lied to you to keep the Score on track."

"You're right, I wouldn't mind checking it out for myself, but for now, stopping the war should come first," Luke answered.

"Are things really that bad?" Asch inquired.

"You didn't hear any rumours in Daath?"

'No, I was kind of unconscious,' Asch grumbled, making use of their connection as Anise walked out onto the deck.

"Morning Anise," Luke spoke up without even turning around. It was lunch time and the birds were diving into the water. How did they always manage to catch a fish like that?

"Good Morning Anise," Asch tried, glad Luke's sudden fascination in the birds distracted him from the fact the Fon Master Guardian was ignoring him.

"Good Morning Asch," She replied. "So is everyone else meeting up here or what?"

"I guess so," Asch shrugged. "We need to figure out what we're going to do next. What do you and Ion want to do? I mean you can't go back to Daath, but we can drop you off somewhere safer, if you'd like."

"I'd love that, but if I know Ion, he's going to want to help you guys stop the war," Anise replied.

'Luke?'

'From what Anise told me, the situation between Kimlasca and Malkuth is really bad.' Luke replied without even needing to hear the question. 'Uncle is blaming Malkuth for Natalia and your deaths and Malkuth thinks Kimlasca was behind Akzeriuth's destruction.'
'Damn it!'

"Colonel!" Anise piped up as Jade, Guy and Natalia walked out onto the deck. "Where have you been?"

"I was waiting for the three of you on the bridge," Jade answered as he surveyed the deck. It seemed safe, and they were in an area remote enough that they wouldn't likely be overheard.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming out on the deck?" Natalia inquired, her eyes on Asch. "I would have come and joined you."

"You were still sleeping," Asch provided, "I didn't want to wake you."

"Goodness, just how early were you up?" She asked, she thought she had been up early considering the circumstances.


"Yes, the waters were rather rough for a bit this morning weren't they?" Jade commented. "Strange though, the sky was clear, I wonder what would have caused it."

"Who knows," Asch shrugged. Truth be told, neither he nor Luke had been able to sleep very well. So instead they had spent the morning on the deck and Luke explained to him what had happened since he had woken up in Yulia City. Luke had spoken about Tear for quite awhile, and Asch could tell he missed the melodist. It was obvious that Luke was still unsure of his decision to leave her behind, even if it had been the right thing to do.

Once all this war fiasco was over and done with, there wouldn't be any reason for any of the others to get involved anymore. Truth be told, Asch wanted to leave Natalia out of it as well. He doubted Van was going to sit back as he and Luke unravelled his plans, and he wasn't going to let her get hurt.

"Good morning everyone," Ion said as he came up onto the deck, still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. Despite the fact that Luke had carried the young Fon Master for the last leg of their journey to allow him the chance to sleep, it was obvious the trip had worn on him. "I hope I didn't miss much."

"Not at all Fon Master, we were just about to discuss our next course of action," Jade replied.

"We have to stop the war!" Mieu hopped off the Fon Master's shoulder and over to Luke who allowed the cheagle to sit on top of his head.

"Mieu's absolutely right," Natalia stated. "We should set sail for Baticul immediately. Once we've arrived-"

"Slow down a bit there Natalia," Luke cut her off, "aren't you forgetting something?"

"And just what might that be?" Natalia shot back coldly, "Are you suggesting there's something more important than stopping this war? Or would you rather see it happen?"

"No, averting the war is our first priority," Jade interjected, "but Luke has the right idea. Have you forgotten that we're riding on a Malkuth vessel? An armed one at that? At this point, regardless of who's on board, we'll be shot out of the water before we're even within sight of Baticul."
"Any chance we could get into Grand Chokmah?" Asch asked.

"Not likely," Jade answered. "I'm presumed dead, and the Tartarus was supposedly captured by the enemy. We'd be fired upon regardless of which capital we approach."

"Is there any way we could approach them by land?" Ion inquired.

"I don't know about Grand Chokmah, but going by land to Baticul would be next to impossible," Asch stated. "The nearest docks are in Belkend and Chesedonia. Going from Belkend takes us through Inista Marsh which is hard enough in the best of times, but this time of year the water rises making it completely impassable. Going from Chesedonia takes us through the desert. Not only would the walk take well over a week, but in the desert there's almost no water or shelter. I don't think I've ever heard of anyone making it across on foot."

"Wow, you sure know a lot for someone who hasn't left Baticul in years," Anise commented.

"It's part of the reason Baticul was built where it was, to help resist land based attacks." Asch replied. "Most of the coastline near there is too treacherous or shallow for ships to dock."

"Unfortunately in this case it works to our disadvantage," Natalia stated.

"Approaching Grand Chokmah would prove to be equally to our disadvantage," Jade commented. "Possible, but it would take at least a week, and that's if we're allowed past Theor forest, which is heavily guarded in times of peace. I don't fancy trying to get through there with war brooding."

"So where does all that leave us?" Anise asked.

"Nowhere," Asch stated. "We're right back at square one."


'I say Jade's right, there's not much we can do with the Tartarus.'

'You want to see if there's a way we could at least check out St. Binah?'

'That might not be a bad idea. At least it's better than doing nothing.' Luke shrugged.

"Figure anything out over there, Guy?" Luke asked, breaking the tense silence that had fallen over them all. Guy was standing off to the side, the strange stone they had gotten from Dist in his hands.

"Ah yes, what did we manage to procure from that wonderful encounter with our God-General friend?" Jade inquired peaking over Guy's shoulder.

"I think I know what this is, but I just don't see how it's possible," Guy replied.

"Why? What do you think it is?" Anise took a closer look at the artefact Guy was hanging onto, causing the blonde to jump back.

"D-Don't do that!" Guy trembled.

"Oops, sorry Guy," Anise apologized.

"Well what is it?" Asch asked as he rolled his eyes. Honestly, what was so scary about a girl?

"I think it's a hover drive," Guy said hesitantly.
"A hover drive? Isn't that Dawn Age technology?" Ion inquired.

"Yeah. That's why I can't believe it," Guy held the stone up to the light, the sun revealing the sparkling glyphs all over the stone. "They're doing work with them in Sheridan. If you equip it to a machine, it allows the machine to fly through the sky. All the fon machine buffs are talking about it."

"Ah yes, I recall those," Ion confirmed. "They were excavated by the Order. I approved the project to share the technology with Kimlasca."

"Then what was someone like Dist doing with his grubby hands on it?" Anise asked.

"Well I know two were excavated, but to my knowledge both were entrusted to the researchers in Sheridan," Ion replied.

"He probably stole it," Jade pointed out. "He never was above stooping to such levels for his own ends."

"Then do you suppose we could use these flying machines to take us to Baticul?" Natalia inquired.

"Probably not," Guy said, "I doubt they've managed to build a machine yet, the whole project only started a little over a year ago, and even so, we can't just waltz in there and demand to use it."

"You're right, I'm sorry."

"That's alright, don't worry about it Natalia," Guy replied, "You were just thinking about your people. Either way, I think we should return the hover drive to Sheridan at the very least."

"But what about the war?" Natalia protested. "If things continue, innocent Kimlascans may end up getting caught in the cross fire."

"It's not just the Kimlascans that will get hurt," Luke pointed out. "Lots of innocent lives would be lost if a war started, but I don't see what else we can do right now."

"Luke's right," Asch agreed, "As things stand we can't make it to either capital. At least from Sheridan we could send a message to Mother and Father, they might be able to speak with Uncle about it."

"Why not send a letter to his Majesty?" Guy inquired.

"Because it would be more likely to be intercepted, and not even make it to the King at all," Jade provided. "It would be assumed as a ploy by Malkuth to make Kimlasca lower their defences. Am I right?"

"Yeah, they probably wouldn't believe it was from us. At least with Mother and Father, it would be easier to say something that could prove our identities. But even that's not guaranteed to work."

"It's better than nothing," Luke agreed.

'Besides,' Asch added, 'with all the fontech and work on Dawn Age technology in Sheridan, we might be able to find something on the passage rings there.'

'Yeah.'

'I don't want to dismiss St. Binah just yet.'
'Not until we're sure it's safe,' Luke agreed.

"Sheridan isn't too far from here right?" Asch inquired.

"It's on the eastern edge of this continent." Jade replied, "If we set off now, we should be able to make it by sundown."

Jade's time projection had proven to be a bit off. They had sailed further east over the night then he had thought, so the sun was just barely beginning to set as they walked into Sheridan. The town had been built on a cliff overlooking the sea, just east of the mountains and winding valleys known as the Meggiora Highlands that made up the majority of the continent.

The surrounding lands were too dry and barren to grow crops and the mineral content of the earth was dismal in the face of Auldrant's mining communities like Akzeriuth, so Sheridan had become an industrial town. There wasn't a ship they couldn't build, and despite the town's Kimlascan location, their products could be found all over Auldrant.

"Excuse me?" Asch caught the attention of the first person they came by.

"Hm?" The man turned around, he looked to be no more than Guy's age. He was wearing a blue jacket and white ascot, his confused brown eyes contrasting against his silver hair that shone in the evening light. "Oh hello there," He spoke up after a moment, "I haven't seen you around here before. Are you new in town?"

"You could say something like that," Asch replied. "We're looking for the people in charge of the hover drive project."

"Oh, you mean the Albiore?"

"Is that what they're calling the flying machine?"

"That's right," the man replied, "Are you guys fon machine buffs?"

Asch stole a glance at Guy who was almost bouncing he was so happy. "Some of us more so than others," He finally provided with a grin.

"I'm Ginji," the man smiled and extended his hand.

"I'm Asch," Asch shook Ginji's hand. "The kid in a candy store over there is Guy," Asch replied pointing to the blonde who was still positively beaming. "This is Jade, Anise, Natalia, Ion-"

"Wait, Fon Master Ion?" Ginji interrupted.

"That's correct. It's a pleasure to meet you," Ion replied.

"Not at all the pleasure's all mine!" Ginji eagerly shook Ion's hand. "Oh I'm sorry!" He said, realizing he had cut Asch off.

"That's okay-"

"I'm Mieu!" The little cheagle bounced in front of their newest acquaintance.

"It's a pleasure to meet you too, Mieu," He smiled. Asch rolled his eyes and sighed in frustration at
having been interrupted yet again. "You were saying?" Ginji returned his attention to the red head.

Asch nodded to his left, "and this is my twin brother, Luke."

Ginji smiled at Luke, but then froze when he actually noticed the other red head, a look of confusion and shock sweeping over his face. He looked at Asch, then back at Luke, then back at Asch again. "Wow" he chuckled, "You two really are identical."


"Sure thing. Grandpa and the others are working over in the Meeting Hall. I was headed over there anyways, so I can show you if you'd like."

"Thanks, we'd really appreciate it."

"No problem."

"Grandpa, there are some people here who'd like to see you," Ginji spoke up as they entered the building. At the center of the open room stood a large table and several chairs in which were seated two older men, and an older woman.

"What do you want? Can't you see we're busy?" The woman replied.

"Oh, hello Aunt Tamara. I'm sorry for bothering you, but these people wanted to speak with you," Ginji replied.

"With the Albiore almost completed, we're as busy as ever, can't it wait?" One of the older men spoke up.

"Is it really almost done?" Guy eagerly jumped in.

"Yes, we've just finished the final adjustments," the third man at the head of the table replied. "We'll be able to conduct the first test flights soon."

"Well if you're done the final adjustments, then surely you can spare a minute or two to talk to my friends, right?" Ginji retorted with a grin.

"He's got a point there lemon," Tamara taunted the first man.

"Fine, but make it quick."

"Thanks Grandpa."

"Don't push your luck," Iemon mumbled.

"So what is it you needed to speak with us about?" Tamara asked.

"If you want the plans to the Albiore you can just-"

"Aston!" Iemon cut the other man off. "Sorry, ever since the thefts...

"I'm telling you it was Class I!" Aston protested. "They're never up to any good in Belkend!"

"You've had something stolen?" Ginji inquired. "Why didn't anyone tell me about it?"
"Sorry, it happened quite some time ago. We've been trying to keep it quiet because of what was taken," Iemon replied.

"Why? What did they steal?"

"One of the hover drives, and the plans to the Albiore," Tamara provided. "We managed to get the plans back, but they got away with the hover drive."

"If I ever get my hands on-"

"Actually," Asch started, cutting Aston off. "That's what we're here about."

"We came upon this in our journeys," Guy said placing the hover drive on the table. "We thought it might belong to you."

"It's the hover drive!" All three of them stood up out of their chairs, practically falling over each other to get a closer look.

"This is definitely a hover drive," Ginji, who had been standing closest to Guy, picked up the artefact, beating all three of his seniors to it.

"Where did you get that?" Iemon demanded.

"It doesn't really matter now does it? They returned it and we'll be able to finish off the Albiore II!" Tamara exclaimed. "How could we ever thank you?"

"Hey, do you guys want to see the Albiore?" Ginji offered.

"Would we ever!" Guy jumped at the opportunity.

"It's locked up for the night, but I'll take you by first thing in the morning," Ginji replied with a smile.

"Tomorrow?" Asch mulled it over. He had hoped to get a message sent out, check for information and be gone before then.

'It is getting late.' Luke pointed out. 'Admit it; you want to see it too.'

'Shut up. Besides, even if I do, if we're looking at over a week to get to either capital, we really don't have the time to waste.'

"Please come," Ginji said, sensing Asch's uncertainty. "I'm sure you have lots of important things to do, but it's getting late. Please stay the night here; I'd really like the chance to show you the Albiore."

"Alright," Asch agreed after a moment. "As long as that's alright with everyone else?"

"I have no objections," Ion spoke up, "I admit, I'm rather curious as well."

"I think we could all use a good night's rest," Jade shrugged.

"Alright, then it's decided," Ginji stated with a grin. "I'll meet you all in front of the meeting hall here in the morning, and we can head over to the docking bay together."

"Until then, you're free to do as you will," Jade added, "It wouldn't be a bad opportunity to stock up on some supplies."
'You should see if you can find yourself a jacket or something to tide you over until we get back to Baticul,' Asch mentioned as everyone parted ways once they got outside.

'What are you going to be doing?'

'I've a couple things I want to take care of. I'll get the letter sent to Mother and Father as well.'

'Want me to see if I can find any information on the passage rings?' Luke offered.

'Sure, just make sure you aren't out too late.'

'I won't,' Luke laughed. It had been awhile since Asch's big brother nagging had kicked in. 'I'll see you back at the inn tonight?'

'Yeah, see you then.'

Luke mulled over the few jackets the last merchant had for sale, but there wasn't anything that caught his interest. He let out a huge sigh, not only had he been unable to find any information on the passage rings, but he hadn't even managed to find a half-decent coat.

"Luke." The redhead jumped at the voice that came from behind him.


"I don't know why Asch hasn't spoken to you about this yet," she began, "but it's obvious he has no intention of doing so, so I will in his stead."

"Speak to me? About what?" Luke asked worriedly. Was something wrong that he didn't know about?

"Your actions in Akzeriuth were completely unacceptable!" Oh…Luke inadvertently tensed up. That's what she meant. But Luke knew there would be no escaping Natalia's lecture, and all things considered, he did deserve it. So he was simply silent and listened to her tirade.

She went on for what seemed like hours, each line hurting that much more than the last. Luke bit his lip, fighting back all the emotions she was digging up, but he was failing. His stomach lurched when she started on about priorities. About how his priorities should have been to help Asch, and to help save lives, not play hero. About how all those lives had been lost because he had been selfish, thoughtless, reckless, the list went on and on. Did she think he didn't know that already?!

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, she stopped. Luke didn't dare look her in the eye; he wouldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing she had broken him. They stood in silence for awhile, as the last light of day faded over the horizon.

Natalia waited. Waited for some sort of acknowledgement, or, knowing Luke, some kind of denial. Anything that might have shown he had been paying the least bit of attention to anything she had said; but it never came. Well, if he would be that way, then fine! But there was one message that he would hear, and that she would make sure he understood.

"Don't get in Asch's way," She stated coldly, turning and leaving without another word. Luke stood in the empty street, long after he was sure the princess was gone.
'Luke, what's the matter?'

'Not… not now Asch,' Luke replied, hiding his emotions from his worried sibling. He wasn't going to drag Asch into this. Because… because Asch loved Natalia, and Luke wanted Asch to be happy. He finally understood why Asch had kept his problems with Guy to himself all these years.

'Okay,' Asch replied simply, sensing his presence was unwanted. Luke wanted to be left alone, and he would respect that.

So Asch left Luke alone.

Alone with his thoughts… and with his tears.

"Sorry," Asch returned his attention to the figure in the shadows.

"That's alright," The female voice replied.


"From what I heard it was quite the scuffle. They've got her in Daath now, but I wasn't able to find out anything more than that. I've got a few friends still hanging around, but there's only so much they can find out."

"You're sure about this?" Asch inquired.

"I am," The voice replied, "Sweetheart, you know this is probably a trap right?"

"I do, but we can't just leave her."

"That's what he's counting on."

"I know," Asch stated.

"Well, do be careful."

"I will, thanks Noir."

"It's my pleasure, Honey." Noir gave him one last seductive smile before fading into the night.

"Good Morning," Jade nodded towards the blonde and the princess who had just joined them in front of the meeting hall.

"Morning, Jade," Guy was grinning from ear to ear in anticipation of the so-called "tour" they had been promised.

Just as he had said he would, Ginji had been there when Jade had made his way to the meeting hall, much to his disappointment. Jade had hoped to get in a private word with the redheads who had also been in front of the meeting hall, but it seemed that it would have to wait. He would be as patient as he had to be, but he would eventually find out just what had happened in Akzeriuth.
"Good Morning Colonel," Natalia also replied. "Are we almost ready to go?"

"We're just waiting for Ion and Anise!" Mieu piped up.

"Ion's probably still pretty tired and I don't think Anise would go anywhere without him, so we're just waiting on the two of them," Asch offered, his gaze never leaving Luke who was happily chatting with Ginji.

Whatever the problem had been with Luke the night before, it couldn't still be bothering him. Asch wasn't able to detect any trace of the distress that he had sensed the previous night, so either Luke had dealt with whatever the problem was, or he was hiding it from him. Asch didn't like the implications of the second option. But he didn't have the time to dwell on it; they had a new and much more serious problem.

Two figures in the distance distracted Asch from his thoughts.

"I'm sorry, are we late?" Ion asked as he caught his breath, they had obviously run most of the way. "Not at all, we were waiting for you," Natalia offered.

"We would have been here sooner," Ion said with an apologetic bow, "but I had trouble getting Anise out of bed."

Everyone turned to look at the young Fon Master Guardian, who grumbled something inaudible as she secured one of her pigtails, and everyone laughed.

"So is everyone ready to go?" Ginji asked.

"Sorry Ginji," Asch cut in, "But we're going to have to skip out."

"What?! Why?!" Guy demanded. "Because we're going back to Daath," Asch stated.

"Daath?" Jade inquired. Even he couldn't imagine what would possess the young noble to want to return there.

"Are you crazy?" Anise yelled, "Did you forget what happened the last time we were there, or are you just stupid?"

"Tear's been captured by the Oracle Knights," Asch continued, ignoring the Fon Master guardian.


"She must have come back to the Outer Lands looking for you," Asch turned his attention to Luke. He knew this was going to be harder on him than the rest of them. "According to the information I got, she had been asking around, and when the Oracle Knights found out who she was looking for, they arrested her."

"We have to save her!" Luke pleaded. This was his fault; she had gotten caught because she had been looking for him. He didn't want to get her involved in all this, now she was in trouble because of him. Damn it!

"What's the problem?" Ginji inquired worriedly.

"Some people in Daath are holding a friend of ours, prisoner." Asch provided.
"But why? Why would they capture your friend?"

"I'm afraid it's us they're likely after," Jade pointed out.

"It's due to some unsettled affairs within the Order," Ion stated apologetically. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to agree with Asch, we should be off as soon as possible. We're sorry for having you come meet us like this."

"But there has to be more to it then that," Ginji protested.

"There's a lot, and it's complicated," Asch provided apologetically. "We don't want you to get all caught up in this mess."

"But there has to be something I can do to help!" Ginji stated, exasperated.

"Why don't you take them in the Albiore?" Every spun around to see Iemon and Aston approaching them.

"It's ready to go?" Ginji inquired.

"She is, though she's never flown before. I wish we could have done more test flights…" Aston trailed off.

"You take them, I think it's a magnificent mission for her maiden voyage. Besides we'll never be able to test her properly if we don't take her on a real flight," Iemon argued.

"You're heartless you know that…" Aston mumbled.

"Take us?" Asch inquired, "What's he talking about?"

"What didn't Ginji here tell you?" Aston spoke up, "he's the Albiore's pilot."

"Really?!" Guy exclaimed his eyes lighting up.

"That's right," Ginji admitted sheepishly.

"That's pretty impressive, why didn't you tell us?" Asch asked curiously.

"I could say the same for you," Ginji replied with a grin. Asch looked at him curiously. "I finally remembered where I'd heard your name before; you're engaged to Princess Natalia and the heir to the Kimlascan throne, aren't you?"

"That's right," Asch replied.

"And you're the lucky lady aren't you?" Ginji added with a look towards Natalia, making her blush and confirming his suspicions.

"But in the end does it matter?" Asch inquired a grin on his face.

"Exactly," Ginji pointed out. "But in all due seriousness," he continued, growing more solemn, "I'd like to help you rescue your friend. It's the least we can do after you returned the hover drive."

"It would certainly be faster than taking the Tartarus," Jade pointed out.

"We can have the Albiore ready to go in an hour," Iemon said, taking Jade's statement as an affirmative.
"Then I'd better go get supplies together. I'll meet you back here in an hour," Ginji offered before
taking off. "I want to hear the full story on the way though!" He called back before vanishing from
sight.

"He's almost as stubborn as you are," Anise commented once the pilot was out of sight.

"I guess we're all going on the Albiore," Luke said, far less enthusiastically then he normally
would have. He was really worried about Tear.

"No," Natalia interrupted. "You can wait here, the rest of us will go rescue to Tear and we'll come
get you when-"

"Natalia!" Asch cut his fiancée off. He couldn't believe what he had just heard her say. "What's
gotten into you lately? Luke has just as much right to come rescue Tear as the rest of us."

"You're right, I'm sorry," Natalia backed down. Asch felt bad for snapping at her, but seriously,
what was her problem all of a sudden? Sure she and Luke had never gotten along, but she had
never been so openly or avidly against him.

"Okay," Asch dismissed the topic for now. He would have to talk to Luke later though. There was
something going on behind his back, and he didn't like it. "If we're going to Daath, I'm going to go
get some extra supplies."


"Okay, I guess we'll see you guys later then?" Asch inquired.

"Before you go," Jade cut in as the boys turned to leave, "are you sure this 'information source' of
yours is reliable?"

Asch thought on it a moment. "Yeah," he said after a brief contemplation, "she's pretty reliable.
Anything else you'd like to ask, old man?"

"Not for the time being." Jade replied, pushing his glasses back up his nose.

"See you in an hour, then." Luke waved as he followed Asch down the street.

"I think it would be best if we do the same and regroup in an hour. This is not going to be an easy
endeavour." Jade suggested.

"Sh- sh-she?!" Natalia finally managed to form words. It couldn't be- no. Asch would never stoop
to that level. He would never...

"I wouldn't be all that surprised if other women were attracted to him," Jade said slyly. He was the
only one left still standing in the vicinity when Natalia had managed to choke out her indignation.
"He isn't terribly bad looking."

"Colonel!"

"Luke either for that matter, but that's rather redundant now isn't it? What I don't understand is how
you can love one so dearly, and yet despise the other so much."

"There's more to one's character than appearance," Natalia shot.

"True, but likewise there is more to one's character than position."
"What are you implying by that?!"

"Nothing at all Princess, nothing at all."

An hour later, everyone once again met Ginji in front of the meeting hall, only this time it was the redheads that were late. Nevertheless, they quickly made their way through Sheridan towards the hangar where the Albiore was being developed. On the outside, the docking bay looked just like any other warehouse, but when they walked in the door, it obviously wasn't. Guy's eyes lit up at the sight of the Albiore, a huge fon machine sitting in the center of the building. Several panels were open and had a handful of people doing one last check, but other than that, it looked ready to go.

"Wow," Anise looked up at the machine. "Will that thing really fly?"

"Of course it will fly!" Tamara snapped. "The Albiore carries all our hopes and dreams, it will never fall."

"Is everything ready, Aunt Tamara?" Ginji asked.

"Yes," Tamara replied. "It's just waiting for you."

"Then let's go save that friend of yours!" Ginji stated enthusiastically as he led everyone up the gangplank.

"I must say, of all the places I expected to go, the sky isn't one of them," Jade stated.

"Why, scared old man?" Asch shot.

"Hardly," Jade shot back, "I was merely stating that this is a first."

"It's a first for us all," Ginji pointed out as he settled in the cockpit. "No one has flown the skies since the Dawn Age."

"Then let's make this a trip worthy of that first step," Luke stated.

"Yes, let's go."

"Can you pass me that-" Ginji stopped short when the redhead handed him the apple that had been sitting on the seat next to him.

"Haven't had breakfast yet?"

"Yeah," Ginji admitted sheepishly. "Thanks, Asch."

"I'm Luke," The young noble said with a chuckle.

"Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry!" Ginji blurted out, making Luke laugh outright.

"Don't worry about it, it happens all the time."

"But I'm really sorry," The pilot repeated.
"I said it's okay," Luke smiled, "you're not the first and won't be the last."

Luke glanced behind him. Ion and Anise were both looking out one window in awe. Asch was glaring at Guy who was practically hanging over him as he tried to get a better look at how the inside of the Albiore was put together, and Natalia sat next to his bitter sibling, holding Asch's hand as she looked out her window. Jade sat across from them and was simply enjoying the entire thing.

Grinning ear to ear, Guy poked his head in the cockpit. "Hey Ginji." The pilot was suddenly intently focused on the air in front of them, and didn't reply. "What's the matter?" Guy asked after a few minutes, noticing just how much their newest companion was struggling.

Ginji still didn't reply, the apple Luke had passed him hitting the floor as he put both hands on the wheel.

"What's the matter?" Luke inquired worriedly, drawing the attention of the others.

"The headwinds are a lot stronger than I thought they'd be," the pilot managed as he fought with the controls. "I don't know how much longer... I can keep us in the air..."

"Wait! If he can't keep us in the air..." Anise began, "doesn't that mean that we're going to-"

"Crash," Jade finished for her, still somehow perfectly calm.

"It's no good! Strap yourselves in!" Ginji yelled and everyone wasted no time in doing so.

No longer able to fight against the fierce air currents, the Albiore and all its passengers were sent plummeting towards the earth.
"So much for never falling…" Anise grumbled as she crawled out of the Albiore. "Are you alright Ion?" She asked as she helped the Fon Master down.

"I'm fine," Ion replied as he accepted her hand. "What about everyone else?"

Asch, Guy, Jade and Natalia had already gotten out and were waiting a few feet from the Albiore. Ion spotted Luke who had climbed up on the front and was helping Ginji out of a small door on the side of the cockpit. He let out a sigh of relief, everyone was fine.

"What happened?!!" Anise exclaimed once they had all regrouped.

"I'm so sorry," Ginji mumbled ashamedly. "The headwinds were much stronger than I'd anticipated."

"Why didn't you say anything about that before we left?" Anise demanded.

"We weren't supposed to be heading this way," the pilot replied. "I took a bit of a detour to avoid a storm system. But I didn't expect the winds here to be quite so strong…I'm sorry, this is all my fault."

"You really shouldn't be so hard on yourself," Jade commented, eyeing the Albiore. "Considering our surroundings, you did a magnificent job of reducing the damage. We could have easily ended up dangling from one of those cliffs, or colliding into the valley walls."

"He's right," Ion agreed, "and no one's hurt. You did a wonderful job for someone who's never flown before."

"But you were in a hurry to save your friend, and now I messed it up and she might end up getting hurt," Ginji hung his head.

"It's alright," Asch said softly, "There's nothing you could have done otherwise. You couldn't have known. Besides, don't you worry about a thing; we're still going to save her."

"Thanks," Ginji gratefully smiled at the redhead.

"That's all well and said," Guy spoke up, "but how are we going to do that? I mean, we're stranded in the middle of the Meggiore Highlands from the looks of things, it could take us days to find our way out."

"Do you think there's any chance you could fix the Albiore?" Luke inquired.

"That's a good question," Ginji surveyed the machine, doing some quick calculations in his head. The frame sustained only minor damage, nothing that would prevent it from flying. The trouble would be with the engine, and the hover drive might have fallen out of place, but that wasn't something a little elbow grease couldn't temporarily repair. "I probably could, but given what I have to work with, it'll only be enough to get us back to Sheridan. They have the tools there to do further repairs. I could probably have it running by night fall."

"That's good news," Jade replied. "Please have it ready as soon as you can."

"I will!" Ginji stated determinately.
"Do you need any help?" Luke asked as Ginji immediately fetched some tools from the cockpit and put himself to work.

"No not really-" Ginji was cut off by the rumbling of his stomach.

"But you could use something to eat?" Luke suggested with a chuckle.

"It would be nice." Ginji sheepishly admitted.

"Well there's bound to be something worth hunting around here," Asch provided.

"You want to go exploring?" Guy inquired sceptically.

"You want to starve?" Asch shot back.

"Well we don't have anything better to do," Anise shrugged. "I wouldn't mind a good meal rather than rationed supplies."

"A walk certainly wouldn't hurt," Natalia agreed.

"You're all hopeless," Guy sighed. "Well don't blame me if we get lost."

"Luke, you're staying here, right?" Natalia rather forcefully suggested with a cold look. "You can keep Ginji company."

"That's alright," Ginji shouted from under the Albiore. "I won't be very good company. You should all go."


"Fine," Natalia said with a defeated sigh as she took Asch's arm and forcefully dragged him away from the crash site.

"Man, how much longer is she going to keep up this whole 'leave Luke behind' bit? It's really getting old," Anise commented. "Asch is obviously not going to let it happen, so why doesn't she just drop it?"

"Frankly, I'll just be glad to see her drop her attitude towards Luke altogether," Guy added. "It isn't like her to be like that. Even given the circumstances, she's hardly been fair. Wouldn't you agree, Luke?"

"Yeah…" Luke trailed off.

"Well, we'd better go after them before she drags Asch into a pit of vipers," Anise stated, earning a chuckle from the rest of the group.

Jade smirked, "Oh it's far too late for that."

"Damn!" Asch cursed as the boar fled, squealing down the valley and out of sight. Even with the injury Asch had managed to incur, it was still much faster than any of them. It would be completely pointless to try and chase it down, especially in the heat that was quickly escalating as the sun rose in the sky.

"Well at least we know that there's something worth hunting in these parts," Jade commented as Asch shot his sibling a glare and re-sheathed his sword.

"Are you alright Natalia?" Asch asked as he offered a hand to the princess who had been knocked over by the animal's charge. The boar had caught them all off guard, attacking them when they had accidentally wandered too close to its den. Natalia had been the one to take the hit from the creature, but Asch's retaliating swing had injured the beast and caused it to retreat.

"I am, thank you," she replied with a smile as she accepted his help up. But rather than let go once she was on her feet, she pulled him into her embrace. Asch squirmed uncomfortably as she pulled him close and finally ducked out of her arms when she made her advance.

"A-Asch...what's the matter?" Natalia's face turned beet red at Asch's clear aversion to her attempt to give him a kiss. Asch bit his lip but didn't respond, refusing to look her in the eyes.

"Not feeling quite that impulsive yet, Luke?" Jade asked slyly, wearing nothing short of an evil grin. The redhead before them, dressed in Asch's attire, erupted into a fit of laughter.

"What?!" The entire group spun around to find Luke, or as the case turned out to be, Asch, almost on the ground he was laughing so hard, joining Luke who was now in an equal amount of hysterics. Asch felt a little bad for Natalia; it wasn't the first time their switch had been uncovered by something like this. Luke was always good about not letting Natalia misplace signs of affection; he respected the boundaries of the relationship Asch shared with her, a fact that made Asch feel better about it all. But she was still embarrassed, and he really did feel bad, but the looks on their faces were just so funny! Besides, unlike most of the time, he actually had a reason for making use of their trick.

Everyone could only watch the twins in varying degrees of surprise. For some reason, because Luke had lost his coat, they hadn't expected them to switch. A stupid thought really, it was just a simple trade of clothes and swords after all. If anything with everyone's guards down, it was easier to pull off.

"You two..." Guy marched over to where Luke had taken his place beside his sibling, both still stifling their laughter. The blonde took a swing at his best friend, who easily ducked out of the way. The blow went astray and was caught by the second redhead who twisted Guy's arm and sent him crashing into the dust. Both boys leant over him with matching mischievous grins.

"You of all people should know better," Asch taunted.

"The same trick won't work twice," Luke finished.

"I give up," Guy sat up with a defeated sigh.

"S-Since when?!" A rather panicked Natalia demanded. Her heart had stopped. Last night… it couldn't have been…

"What was that Natalia?" Both boys looked up.

"Since when?" She repeated with more authority this time. Of all the things to pull… Natalia absolutely loathed that trick of theirs. They were good at it, so good it was almost scary. Far too often had she been tricked by them as kids. Never anything serious of course, Asch would never allow it, but it still bothered her. Didn't Asch understand how frightening it was to so easily be able to mistake someone else for their future king? Especially when it had been years since either of
them had gotten caught.

"Since this morning," the real Asch replied as he accepted his coat from Luke and tossed it over his shoulders. Natalia let out a sigh of relief, but quickly regained her composure.

"Why?" She demanded.

Both boys looked at each other.

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"Hey Luke?" Asch spoke up as he and his sibling walked down the streets of Sheridan. They still had about ten minutes before the Albiore was supposed to be ready. "Can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"Have the others been giving you a hard time lately?"


Asch suddenly stopped in the middle of the street and Luke almost tripped over himself to do the same. Luke could only confusedly look back as Asch stared him down.

"You're lying," Asch finally said.

"No I'm not!" Luke protested.

"Really?" Asch gave Luke a pointed look before taking off his coat and holding it out. "Then prove it."

Luke couldn't resist a grin as he snatched the coat out of Asch's grasp.

"Fine, I will."

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Natalia gave them both a disapproving look; for all that she knew it was pointless. It would take a lot more than that to get them to stop that ridiculous trick of theirs.

"What's so funny?" Ion finally asked Anise who was in fits of giggles.

"Yes, please do share." Natalia added sceptically, more than sure she was the source of the young girl's amusement.

"I just think it's hilarious. I mean, you can't even recognize your own fiancée?" Anise managed between giggles. "Well I guess if he ducks out at the wedding you know you've got the wrong one."

"Why I never-" Natalia sputtered before spinning around and storming off.

"Someone needs a sense of humour," Anise stated dryly.

"We should probably go after her," Asch commented.

"Well there certainly isn't any point in staying here indefinitely," Jade pointed out, still wearing a
"That's true," Guy agreed. "We should try and catch something and head back before long. I have a feeling it's going to get really hot by the time that sun gets overhead."

"Then let's hurry along," Ion said with a smile.


The sun was high in the sky and the heat was quickly escalating as everyone continued down the endless twisting valleys. They hadn't come across anything worth hunting since the boar had escaped them and everyone's patience was quickly eroding as the temperature continued to creep up.

Asch watched Natalia who was walking next to and just slightly ahead of him. He had learnt a lot in the brief time he had spent pretending to be Luke, and what he had found concerning Natalia bothered him more than anything. Guy and Ion were supportive, always offering a reassuring smile or willing to engage in idle conversation. Out of the corner of his eye, he kept catching Jade who was constantly stealing glances in his direction, as if contemplating something. To Anise he simply didn't exist, but Natalia… Natalia was constantly making it known that his presence was unwanted.

That concerned him most of all because Natalia wasn't that kind of person. It was true that she and Luke had never gotten along, and Akzeriuth couldn't have helped matters much, but Natalia was a kind person at heart. She was strong, loyal and always open to others, it was what made her an amazing princess. She was loved dearly by her people for it, and it was why he loved her. So her sudden change in behaviour concerning Luke was really starting to worry him. Something to talk to her about later perhaps. He gently ran his fingers through her golden hair, softly laughing when she tensed up. She had done it again.

Natalia almost had to bite her lip to cut off what she was about to say. She was ready to snap at Luke again, but it was Asch running his fingers through her hair. At least he wasn't offended by it, or at least he didn't seem to be by the way he was softly chuckling. What did he expect still wearing Luke's top like that? She almost laughed at herself; did she really depend on their clothes to tell them apart that much? Maybe Anise was right in her taunting, what kind of wife would she make if she couldn't even recognize her own husband?

Anise snickered as she watched Natalia bite back yet another snide remark as she once again almost mistook her fiancée for his twin brother. Asch had only taken his jacket back after the two of them had been discovered earlier this morning and since it had gotten so hot, he had taken it off and was carrying it. It wasn't surprising Natalia kept mistaking him for Luke out of the corner of her eye like that.

Anise couldn't believe she couldn't tell them apart! But in the end it really wasn't all *that* funny. After all, Guy had grown up with both of them, and he couldn't tell them apart either. Neither could she for that matter, it really was a testament as to how good the two of them were at pulling off being each other.

There had to be something, Anise watched both twins as she walked behind them. After all, the Colonel could tell, so there had to be *something* different about them, even when they switched places, and she was determined to figure it out. Wait a second… Anise once again looked over the boys. They hadn't traded back clothes, but they hadn't traded back swords either. Luke still had
Asch's sword at his side, Asch still wore Luke's sword behind him, but the way they were sheathed…

"No good," Guy cut in noticing the direction of Anise's gaze and guessing at her train of thought.

"What do you mean 'no good'?'" Anise protested.

"We tried that already," Guy replied. "When they were younger we could tell them apart because Asch was right-handed and Luke was left-handed. But they figured that out real quick and they're pretty much ambidextrous now."

"They're what?"

"Ambidextrous," Asch answered. "It means I can use one hand as well as the other."

"Nice of you to join us," Guy shot at the eavesdropper.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you it's rude to have a conversation behind someone's back?" Asch shot back somewhat playfully.

"Nope, must have been too busy doting on a certain pair of demanding redheads," Guy shrugged eliciting a chuckle from Asch. Wow, Anise watched the two of them joke around; Luke being around really did make a difference. Either that or something had happened between them that she didn't know about.

"Isn't that an awful lot of effort to put into a prank?" Anise questioned sceptically.

"You're telling me," Guy answered. "They've gone out of their way to thwart every attempt we've made to distinguish them. Their hair, their swords, their habits, everything! It was like a mission for them or something."

"Or a game," Natalia casually added.

"Or a test," Jade mumbled to himself.

"What was that Colonel?" Anise inquired.

"Oh nothing important," Jade replied, pushing his glasses up his nose.

"By the way Colonel, I've been meaning to ask, how do you always tell them apart?"

"Yeah, she's got a point there, Jade," Guy cut in. "How do you tell them apart?"

"Why that's simple," Jade paused as everyone's attention, including the twins in question, became focused on the Colonel. They were as curious as the rest of the group as to how he always managed to distinguish them. "In a time frame of 53 seconds, Asch blinks two more times than Luke does."

"Really?" Anise asked incredulously as she and Natalia proceeded to fix their gaze on the redheads who could only blink in confusion before laughing outright.

"Sometimes I wonder if you're really kidding," Guy noted sceptically.

"I know how to tell them apart! I do! I do!" Mieu bounced as they continued along the trail through the valley.

"Really?" Natalia inquired with a smile, "and how do you tell them apart?"
"Master calls me 'thing' and Asch calls me 'it'!" The young cheagle proudly exclaimed.

"Thing," Asch taunted.


"Mieuuuuuu," the cheagle's ears sank.

"That's alright Mieu," Natalia reassured the young creature as she offered him a place on her shoulder. "These two's horrid names for you aside," she punctuated her point with a disapproving look in the boy's direction, "we'll figure something out."

"Okay!" Mieu perked back up.

"Hey Ion, are you feeling tired?" Luke inquired noticing the Fon Master's quickly slowing pace and growing strain.

"I'll be fine," Ion replied with a smile, "besides we'll need to find something soon or we'll have to head back empty handed."

"Finding supper won't do us any good if you collapse on us," Luke argued.

"True," Asch added, "but at the same time it's getting really hot out here. Stopping and sitting in this sun won't do him any better than continuing to walk will."

Luke looked around, Asch was right about the sun, and with the sun directly overhead, even the valley walls didn't provide any sort or reprieve from the heat.

"What about over there?" Luke pointed in the direction of a cave not far off in the distance. "If we head in there a ways, it's bound to cool off."

"That might not be a bad idea," Guy agreed, "I think we could all use a bit of a rest. The last thing we need is someone passing out from the heat all the way out here. What do you think Ion?"

Ion looked ahead at the cave to which Luke had pointed. It looked very familiar, but it couldn't be… No it was probably his imagination playing tricks with him, after all many of the caves and rock formations in this area were very similar. It was part of what made this place so treacherous; it was very easy to get lost.

"If you don't mind, I would enjoy the opportunity to rest for a bit," he finally provided.

"Of course we don't mind! Ion if you're tired, say something! You know you have to take care of your health!" Anise stated disapprovingly.

"I know, thank you Anise. I just don't want to be a burden."

"It's no burden at all, Fon Master," Asch spoke up. "If you're feeling tired, chances are you aren't the only one who could use a bit of rest. Don't be afraid to say something, we won't mind."


"Thank you," Ion smiled. He just hoped his suspicions weren't as correct as he was starting to think they might be.
Luke's theory about the cave providing a suitable reprieve from the heat turned out to be a good one. The rush of cold air as they walked in was refreshing and restored a great deal of energy in itself. There was one thing however, that Luke hadn't been counting on, and it now had him, and the rest of the awestruck group frozen to their spots.

Luke's heart stopped, the fon machines, the dawn age technology, Luke knew all this... but it couldn't be...

"Fon Master?" Asch turned around to face Ion after several moments of tense silence, "Is this a passage ring?"

"I guess there's no point in hiding it now. Yes, this is the passage ring that supports Sheridan and the rest of the Meggiora Highlands."

"But the Daathic Seal was removed..." Asch began.

"I assume this was another one of the locations Arietta had you open?" Jade inquired.

"That's right," Ion replied.

"All the way out here?" Anise inquired incredulously.

"Well they were travelling on Arietta's birds," Guy pointed out.

"I guess you're right," Anise admitted. "Still, I find it hard to believe that they knew where to find a place like thing out in the middle of nowhere."

"I can't imagine the information is all that difficult to come by if one knows where to look," Jade stated.

'Wait a second...' a realization suddenly dawned on Luke, 'Ion is the only one that can open these Daathic Seals right?'

'That's right, what are you getting at?'

'If Van's plans really do have to do with the passage rings, then the only ones he can go to are the ones that Ion already opened, right?'

'That's right,' Asch replied catching on to Luke's train of thought. 'So we need to figure out if one of those is the passage ring that supports St. Binah.'

'Do you think there's anything we could do to protect it from here?'' Luke inquired.

'I doubt it, but at the very least we can probably learn a lot more about how they work. Maybe even look for clues to see if Van's been here or not.'

'It's better than nothing.'

"Fon Master, what other passage rings did the God-Generals have you open?" Asch inquired.

"Why the sudden interest?" Jade asked suspiciously.

"I want to see about something," was the only response the Colonel got. Ion sighed as he thought on it a moment, debating whether or not he should continue to divulge such information. But they already knew a great deal, and even though Asch wouldn't say it, there was obviously something that was greatly concerning him.
"You already know of the passage ring in Akzeriuth, and the one here at the Meggiora Highlands," Ion began. "They also had me open the passage ring in the Zao Ruins that supports Chesedonia and a great deal of the surrounding area, and the passage ring at Shurrey Hill that supports St. Binah, Engeve and the Rugnica plains."

"Thank you Fon Master," Asch replied.

'Looks like St. Binah really might be in danger,' Asch commented.

'What are we going to do?!' a panicked Luke asked.

'First you're going to calm down,' Asch stated firmly. 'No matter what we do, we're not going anywhere until Ginji gets the Albiore fixed, so relax. Van can't use a hyperresonance to destroy the passage ring, so he has to operate the Sephiroth. I think we should try to figure out how the passage rings work. Once we know that, we may have a better idea of what kind of time frame we're working in.' Luke didn't reply, but Asch could feel him calming down.

"So what are you planning on doing now?" Jade inquired. "You obviously have something or another in mind."

"If it's alright with you Fon Master, I'd like to take a closer look at the passage ring." Asch replied.

"I don't see why not, there shouldn't be any sort of danger," Ion replied.

"As long as some people don't go stupid on us," Anise mumbled.

"What was that?" Ion inquired.

"I'm inclined to agree with Anise," Natalia stated, "I don't know if Luke coming along is such a good idea. Who's to say what happened last time won't repeat itself?"

Jade eyed the noble in question. Normally he would ere on the side of caution, and since he still didn't know what had transpired in Akzeriuth, keeping Luke away from a passage ring certainly seemed to be on the side of caution. But leaving him alone wasn't a much better option, and Jade had a sneaking suspicion that allowing Luke to come along may very well reap some of the answers he'd been looking for.

"Oh, I don't see a problem with it, so long as he promises to behave," Jade finally said and Luke only solemnly nodded.

'Are you going to be okay?' Asch asked.

'I'll have to be, we need to do this.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yeah.'

Everything was almost identical. The dancing lights, the swirling glyphs, the soft rush of fonons as they flew around the cavern…everything, and the rush of emotions that crashed down on Luke was almost enough to drive him back to insanity. It was only Asch's ever comforting presence in his mind that was keeping him from being completely overwhelmed. It reminded Luke of the days when they were young and Asch would hold his hand so he wouldn't get lost. Now he just had to
find his way.

But with every step they took towards the passage ring, Luke managed to calm himself down. He refused to give in to the feelings that were tempting him back to that wonderful state of irrational denial. No matter how much of a reprieve such a state may be from the gazes and mistrust that were constantly fixed upon him.

By the time they had made it to the passage ring itself, Luke had managed to completely settle his feelings, temporary though that state may be; they were settled none-the-less. He was here, this wasn't Akzeriuth, and it would never be Akzeriuth. He wouldn't let it. There would never be any more Akzeriuths ever again.

"I don't know what you think you're going to find," Anise commented as everyone was taking a look around the passage ring. "I mean, you can't operate these things without breaking the Yulian Seal right?"

"That's right," Ion replied. "The way to open the Yulian Seals was lost long ago."

"Someone still knows," Asch stated quietly as he fingered a faded and broken glyph on the floor.

"What makes you say that?" Ion inquired.

"Because it looks like it's already been broken," he replied.

"What?" Anise squeaked.

"You just might be right," Jade agreed taking note of the remnants of the destroyed magic. "Someone knew what they were doing at the very least."

'Master Van?' Luke asked.

'More than likely.'

"There is of course of way to find out," Jade suggested.

"What's that?" Guy inquired.

"You're thinking of trying to operate the passage ring yourself?" Asch guessed.

"Oh, not me, you," Jade shot back at the redhead.

"Why me?"

"Because if I recall correctly," Jade answered almost tauntingly, "it requires a Seventh Fonist, am I right Fon Master?"

"Yes you are, but I'm not so sure about this," Ion protested. "It's one thing to come down here, but to tamper with the passage rings..."

"However, with the Yulian Seal broken, there's a very good chance they may already have been tampered with," Jade pointed out.

"But if that was the case, then how come we haven't felt any effects above ground?" Natalia inquired.

"That's because at the time we were above water," Jade stated. "Remember those rough waters a
couple days ago? I'd wager they were caused by some sort of earthquake."

"You're right!" Asch suddenly realized what Jade was pointing out.

'But wait a second,' Luke protested. 'I thought they were going after St. Binah next…'

'They may have already been here by the time we overheard them,' Asch pointed out.

'But if they're moving that fast then-'

'Easy… Remember they only have access to a maximum of four of the Sephiroth because that's all Ion opened, and Ion is here with us so they can't open any more. Besides, if they tampered with this passage ring that long ago, and there still haven't been any obvious signs on the land then at least we know that it takes quite awhile for the land to fall, assuming that's Van's intention.'

'So St. Binah and all the other places will be safe?'

'For a little while at least.'

"I'm still not certain…” Ion cut in.

"Can we at least take a closer look, and see if the passage ring still works?" Asch suggested.

"There may not be any problems at all and we could leave it at that. But if this land is going to fall, then we need to make sure that there's no one on it when it does."

"Alright," Ion reluctantly conceded. "But please-"

"Don't worry, I'll be careful," Asch replied as he made his to the passage ring. "The real question is how does this thing work?" He asked as he stared up at the huge device before him.

"I'm afraid even I don't know," Ion replied.

"Asch, over here," Luke called, drawing everyone's attention to a small pedestal that stood in front of the huge fon machine.

"What is it?" Anise asked.

"I don't know," Asch curiously placed his hand on the pedestal. He immediately saw why it had drawn Luke's attention. There wasn't a Seventh Fonon to be found anywhere around it, despite the abundance of them in the room. It was almost as if the material it was made of repelled the Seventh Fonons. But if that were the case, he wondered what would happen if…

'Be careful,' Luke prodded.

'Thank you Ion,' Asch teased and Luke smiled.

"Wow, amazing!" Natalia praised.

Asch had been right, as soon as he had forced Seventh Fonons into contact with the pedestal it opened up like a book before him. He passed a hand over the writing that was inscribed there.

"What is it?" Luke asked curiously peaking at the pedestal that stood between him and his older brother.

"It looks like instructions on how to operate the passage ring," Asch used his free hand to point upwards.
Everyone looked up at the ceiling upon which a huge glyph was now drawn. Upon the glyph there were ten circles, surrounded by many Ancient Ispanian inscriptions. Two of the circles had faded, and around three others there was a bright red line.

"Wow, so what does all that mean?" Natalia asked.

"I'd wager the two faded Sephiroth are Hod and Akzeriuth," Jade replied. "But I'm not certain about the rest."


"Do you think it means this land is in danger of falling into the Qliphoth?" Guy asked.

"We certainly can't deny the possibility," Jade replied.

"But who would do such a thing?" Natalia asked.

'Damn it!' Asch shouted so loud Luke flinched.

'What? What is it?'

'Van's definitely been here. He closed off the valve so that no one else can actually use the passage ring!'


'You see that red ring up there? It's a code Van put there so it's impossible for me to do anything."

'But there are three red rings. Does that mean he's been to at least two other Sephiroth already?'

'Unfortunately, yes,' Asch replied. 'It looks like Shurrey Hill and Zao Ruins from what I can tell.

"Is there anything more you can tell us over there Asch?" Jade inquired.

"Not much," the redhead replied. "The person who did this added a code to block me out. It also looks like the passage rings are starting to push their limits. That's where that warning message is coming from, but that's all I can really tell."

"What do you mean by 'pushing their limits'?" Ion inquired.

"With Hod, and now Akzeriuth's Sephiroth gone, the remaining Sephiroth have to put out more energy to keep the remaining lands afloat," Jade theorized. "The added stress would be hard on the passage rings. It's likely they can only handle so much before they break."

"But the Sephiroth themselves are also unstable," Asch commented, his gaze still fixed on the huge glyph above them.

"Then perhaps the unstable Sephiroth are putting excess stress on passage rings," Jade contemplated aloud. "It's possible that the need to support more land than usual is de-stabilizing the Sephiroth and causing the problem, not the other way around."

"So what will happen if things keep up this way?" Natalia asked.

"If things stay this way the Sephiroth could go out of control. If that were to happen, the passage rings would break and the land would fall." Jade provided.
"And once one breaks," Guy added. "Not only will the land fall, but there'll be even more stress on all the others. It'll be a chain effect."

"Guy's right, once one goes, the fall of the others will be greatly accelerated."

'So Master Van is trying to destabilize the Sephiroth?' Luke asked.

'Looks like it, but I'm not entirely sure about how accurate Jade's theory is.'

'Why's that?' Luke inquired.

'Both Hod and Akzeriuth's fall were predicted in the Score,' Asch pointed out. 'If that alone was enough to cause the fall of the Outer Lands, shouldn't the fall of the Outer Lands also be predicted in the Score? No, Van did something else to the Sephiroth to make it unstable. I just can't figure out what…'

'But why would Master Van want to drop all the Outer Lands?'

'I have no idea, but that's what we need to find out. That and a way to stop it,' Asch stated. 'We're not talking about a single town anymore, if the entire Outer Lands fall into the Qliphoth the death toll would be unreal.'

'Is there any way we could strengthen the Sephiroth, to reduce the stress on the passage ring and keep it from falling?'

'Ion," Luke asked without waiting for an answer from Asch, "Are any of the Sephiroth stronger than the others?"

"Where are you going with that, Luke?" Jade inquired.

"Well the Radiation Gate and the Absorption Gate are the two biggest Sephiroth, they support the Planet Storm," Ion replied after a moment. "Whether that makes them stronger or not, I'm not sure."

"Could we try and somehow use them to strengthen the others?" Luke inquired.

"An interesting theory," Jade pondered. "It might be possible. If you connect this Sephiroth to another, it may help stabilize them as well. Though it's only a short term solution, at the very least it will buy us some time.

'That would do us some good, but you're forgetting something,' Asch pointed out.

'What's that?'

'I can't actually do anything with the passage ring. Van blocked it, remember?'

'Is there anyway to operate it by force?" Luke inquired.

Asch stopped halfway through his retort, and actually thought on it for a bit. 'You know that just might work. If we can erase that code using a hyperresonance and physically carve in the commands, then we might be able to do this.'

'Really?'

'Yeah. Make sure you only erase the red code though.' Asch confirmed.

'Wait me?' Luke suddenly retorted. 'I thought you were going to do it.'
'I can't, it's taking everything I've got just to keep this open. You have to do it.' Asch replied. As he said it, Luke noticed the wave of exhaustion that had fallen over his sibling. It really was taking all his energy. But still…

'I...I can't! What if I screw up?' Luke protested.

'You won't screw up; I know you can do this.' Asch replied reassuringly.

'No, I can't! I'm just going to end up hurting people again! Let me switch places with you, I'll hold the passage ring open, you can carve the commands.'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because at some point you're going to have to grow a backbone and stop being afraid of your own abilities,' Asch stated harshly. 'What's past is past; believe what you want about it. But now there are thousands of people that are depending on you to save them. Are you going to let them all down?'

Luke was completely silent. 'But I…'

'Your choices are pretty clear to me. Either you stop doubting yourself over something that wasn't even your fault, or we can stand here arguing until I pass out, and you can have a couple more thousand lives on your shoulders. It's your choice.'

'You're mean, you know that?' Luke eyed Asch who replied with a mild grin.

'Only when you're being stupid,' he shot back.

'So what am I doing?' Luke asked.

'Well first you're going to erase the code,' Asch started.

'Will you be able to operate it from there if I do?'

'No, once we start doing it by force you'll have to finish it that way,' Asch replied. 'Don't forget that the commands will have to be written in Ancient Ispanian.'

'Oh great,' Luke rolled his eyes. 'Do you know the translations?'

What was up with those two? Natalia and the others could only watch on in amazement. Luke looked at Asch questioningly, and Asch took on a thoughtful look. Luke snickered. Asch scowled. Were they talking to each other somehow? She had heard stories of twins sharing some sort of special bond… but Luke and Asch weren't twins, not really.

Whatever was going on between Luke and Asch, it eventually stopped. Jade couldn't help but wonder if… no, now was not the time to be contemplating such things, there were far more pressing matters at hand. It would certainly make some food for thought later though. In the meantime, Luke now stood facing Asch, staring straight up at the glyph overhead, taking deep breaths. It was almost as if he was working up the courage to try something, but just what would the young noble do? There was nothing to be done so long as that code continued to block the functions of the passage ring, and Asch at the very least was aware of this fact.

With one last deep breath, and a nod from Asch, Luke raised his arms towards the ceiling and a
soft golden glow emerged from the tips of his fingers. That golden glow quickly spread to encompass his entire being, and slowly but surely, the red circle was eliminated, and the code was gone.

A hyperresonance? Jade found himself stunned, able to do nothing but continue to watch as his mind raced, the gears turning unexpectedly quickly as this new piece of information filled in the last piece of the puzzle. Luke was creating a hyperresonance; without the presence of another Seventh Fonist. While Jade didn't understand how it was possible, he certainly couldn't deny what he was seeing. Luke also possessed an amazing degree of control over it. That became more and more obvious as Jade watched the youth carve out Ancient Ispanian commands directly onto the passage ring.

Akzeriuth suddenly made sense, as did Luke's sudden knowledge of fonic artes. In fact, a great deal of things about the so called 'twins' suddenly became very clear. Jade had no doubt that Asch shared this mysterious ability as well, and all the burdens that came along with it. It was no surprise they had kept their abilities secret. Jade wondered if even their parents or the King were aware of their rather unique talent. After all, that kind of power would prove invaluable in war, especially when they had that kind of control over it.

However, if that were the case, then it was entirely possible that Luke had single-handedly caused Akzeriuth's destruction. Not something Jade wanted to consider, but a possibility he would now have to. At the very least he would let Luke speak in his own defence before passing any sort of judgement, but what could Luke have been thinking? He knew how dangerous a hyperresonance was, so why did he do it?

With one last breath, Luke slowly lowered his arms, and the soft golden glow faded away. "That should do it," he stated and earned himself a reassuring nod from Asch. He had done a good job.

"Just what did you do?!" Anise demanded.

"Relax Anise," Ion put a hand on her shoulder and she calmed down. "Nothing bad happened, it's alright."

"Ah, clever," Jade stated taking a look at the finished job. "You connected this Sephiroth to the Absorption Gate to try and help stabilize it. I must say you did a good job of it all things considered."

"Good," Asch let go of the passage ring and let out a huge sigh as the glyph faded and the pedestal slammed shut. "I don't know about everyone else, but I'm more than ready to get out of here."

"I agree, let's start heading back, it's going to be getting late soon," Ion pointed out.

'We're far from being done,' Luke stated.

'I know, it's only a fix for now. We need to find out why Van's doing this and find a way to stop it,' Asch agreed. 'But at least it's a start, and we know where we have to go next.'

'Yeah.'

"Before we get going," Jade cut in as they walked out of the cave. "There's something I want to discuss with you two," he said, a very serious look fixed on Luke and Asch.
"What is it now old man?" Asch rolled his eyes.

"That ability of yours, since when have you had it?" Jade demanded.

"Colonel what are you talking about?" Anise asked hesitantly.

"Yeah, what are you talking about, old man?" Asch inquired.

"You know what I mean," Jade stated curtly, making it clear he wasn't going to tolerate any dancing around his questions. "Since when have you two been able to create a hyperresonance like that?"

"What makes you think I have that kind of ability?" Asch asked, but he only earned himself a harsh glare from the Colonel. There was no getting out of that one. Then again, considering what Jade knew, it was more or less obvious anyways.

"Wait, that was a hyperresonance?" Anise asked curiously. "But I thought that only happened between two Seventh Fonists?"

"That's normally the case," Ion confirmed. "I admit, I've never seen a hyperresonance before either."

"It's something we were born with," Asch shrugged. The last thing he wanted was to play it up, if anything he'd have liked to dismiss it altogether. It wasn't the kind of information he wanted floating around.

"So wait a second, what happened in Akzeriuth was…" Anise began. Everyone's attention including Jade's turned to the other redhead.

"Luke?" Jade asked.

"That's right, it was my hyperresonance that destroyed Akzeriuth's passage ring," Luke stated meeting everyone's gazes with a determined one of his own.

"What were you thinking?!" Natalia demanded.

"I'm going to have to agree with the Princess in this case," Jade stated in an unusually cold tone, his voice slowly rising. "For someone like you, who is more than aware of the dangers such a power hold, to take that kind of ability-"

"Enough!" Asch yelled, cutting everyone off, and bringing a silence over the group. He then turned to face his brother.

"Luke, enough is enough. This has got to stop."

Listening to the force and conviction with which Luke had made his statement had intrigued Asch. It was so strange; it was almost as if Luke had been provoking… of course. Asch silently berated himself for letting things go on this long and for not catching on sooner. He knew Luke better than that.

"No," Luke replied, "They're right, everything they're saying, it's all true."

"No it's not!" Asch landed a blow across Luke's face, forcing Luke back several steps. "Stop saying crap like that when it wasn't even your fault!"

"Asch…what are you talking about?" Natalia tried asking, but she got no response. Both of them
were caught up in their own little world.

"It is my fault." Luke replied, holding his face where Asch's hit had landed. "It's my fault because I realized what was going on... and I couldn't stop it."

"So then what? This is your punishment? You're just going to let everyone hate you forever? You think that's what you deserve? For something you didn't even do?!" Luke shot Asch an angry glare, but didn't retort. "Well guess what," Asch continued. "It's not your fault, so stop using it as an excuse to run away from your problems! You're just using this as a way to avoid having to deal with your own stupid feelings about everything. You feel guilty, and upset and sad, so you let people hate you for it, that way you don't actually have to deal with them."

"I'm not running away!" Luke protested.

"Yes you are! Why else won't you tell anyone the truth? You enjoy getting yelled at, because you feel like you're getting what you deserve, and it makes you feel better. Well guess what, making yourself miserable for the rest of your life won't bring a single one of those people back and it's an insult to their sacrifice! If you weren't running away then you'd face the truth, deal with it, and then do something about it! Don't punish yourself forever; make it up to them by rebuilding everything better than before."

"You're wrong! I still bear the responsibility for what happened. It was my power that killed them all!"

"Luke, for the last time it wasn't your fault! Van tricked you into it! There wasn't anything else you could have done! You tried to stop it!"

"It wouldn't have happened if it had been you down there," Luke quietly retorted.

To that Asch had no reply. He knew the truth in what Luke had said. He probably wouldn't have gotten as far as Luke had before noticing the trap, he would have had a better chance of stopping it. But that didn't make it Luke's fault!

Everyone stood in silence, the tension among them reaching an all-time high. That was quite the information that had just been revealed, unintentional as it may have been. It made sense to Jade then, the last player finally falling into place. Luke, always trying his best to help out, would have been an easy target for the Commandant, rather than his more suspicious and cautious counterpart. He could see why Luke had accepted the blame, since in the boy's mind, regardless of any external influences, the final act had still been his. It also made sense as to why Asch and Luke had suddenly gained a fascination with the passage rings, and were suspicious of Dorian General Grant's activities. Rightfully so, he was concerned himself, now that he knew the man had orchestrated Akzeriuth's demise. What else did he have in mind now that the Albertesque Seal had fallen?

"If you can't let go of that," Asch finally said quietly, "then don't spend the rest of your life looking to be punished for what you've done. Live for the lives you claim to have taken. Bear that burden and make their sacrifice worth it."

Luke looked away, refusing to acknowledge what Asch had said. He was mad. He knew Asch was right, but he was still furious. It wasn't Asch's place to just blurt everything out to everyone like that! But at the same time, what Asch said had hit the nail on the head. Maybe he really had been using the need to feel punished to avoid dealing with his own issues. Damn it, why was Asch always right?!
Asch knew Luke was angry with him, but he also knew that Luke would eventually get over it. Enough was enough, and unlike Guy, he knew better than to just let Luke have his way all the time. Hopefully things would turn out for the better, but in the meantime they all needed a good meal and some decent sleep. Working that passage ring had him far more exhausted than he wanted to admit.

"Shall we head back?" Jade finally suggested, breaking the tension that had settled over them all. "It's getting late and I think we could all use some rest."

"You're right," Guy said, "let's get going."

Everyone silently made their way back down the valley in the direction from which they had come. Guy and Natalia were taking the lead, with Ion and Anise not far behind them. Mieu was sound asleep on Tokunaga's head, and behind them Asch, Luke and Jade were taking up the rear. Jade gently placed a hand on Asch's shoulder and nodded. Getting the message, and satisfied enough that Jade was unlikely to do anything stupid, Asch picked up his pace and joined Natalia at the front, leaving Luke and Jade to fall behind.

"I was quite surprised to see you knew Ancient Ispanian," Jade commented to the silent redhead.

"Yeah, but I'm not very good at it," Luke admitted. Most of the spelling and the commands he had carved earlier, Asch had helped him figure out. "I thought that Ancient Ispanian was something that everyone was taught…"

"Not entirely," Jade replied. "Usually only nobles, scholars and others of greater rank are taught Ancient Ispanian as children."

"Then why were you surprised to see I knew it?" Luke inquired.

"You're right, I apologize."

"You're weird."

"I was never good at idle chatter," Jade commented.

"So then what was it you wanted to ask me?" Luke asked.

"Quite clever, you must get that from Asch."

"Coming from you, I never know if that's a compliment or not…" Luke eyed Jade suspiciously.

"What Asch said earlier," Jade continued, brushing off Luke's scepticism. "About Dorian General Grants 'tricking' you into causing the disaster in Akzeriuth, what did he mean?"

Luke and Jade walked in silence for awhile, as Luke quietly contemplated the question. He didn't know if that was something he felt like divulging. Then again, it was bound to come out eventually, now that the bare facts of it all were out in the open. Then there was the fact that Jade had been patient with him, and hadn't really passed any sort of judgement before trying to figure out what had happened. Maybe he did deserve to hear the truth.

"When I ran into Master Van in Akzeriuth… he said he had found a way to get rid of the miasma," Luke began hesitantly. "I thought if I could get rid of it, then I could save Akzeriuth too, not just all
the people, but the town itself. So Master Van brought me down to the passage ring. He must not have known I could control a hyperresonance, because he was giving me instructions one step at a time."

"Whendid you learn to control your hyperresonance?" Jade interrupted.

"A little bit after Tear and I got swept away from the manor, I guess."

"Ah, so that was why you and Asch kept sneaking off at night."

"Yeah…wait, you knew about that?"

"Please continue," Jade instructed.

"Well… Master Van was coaching me, and then I realized what he was trying to get me to do. I told him I wouldn't do it because it was too dangerous." Good, Jade noted when Luke paused; at least he had realized the danger before it would have otherwise been too late. "But then… then he said something and everything went out of control. Even though I tried to stop it, I couldn't. There were too many fonons for me to handle and then…" Luke trailed off.

"Your hyperresonance went off."

"Yeah."

"What did he say?" Jade inquired.

"I…I don't remember," Luke lied. That was the last thing he wanted to add to today's spectacular list of revelations. "But it was when he said it that all the fonons started gathering and going out of control."

"Luke…how did Dorian General Grants know of your ability to create a hyperresonance?" Jade asked after contemplating what he had been told. Luke thought about it for a moment, how had he known?

"It must have been on the ship to Chesedonia," Luke finally concluded. "I was practicing my hyperresonance and I almost lost control of it. Master Van helped me get it under control again."

"Did you lose consciousness at any point?"

"Yeah I guess I did for a little bit. Why?"

Ahh, so that was the case. Quite a devious ploy on Dorian General Grants' behalf; he was quickly proving to be an adversary that was not to be underestimated. He had obviously very carefully planned everything to have set up all the players as he had. Really, had it not been for such a terrible purpose, Jade would have applauded the man. "Luke, have you ever heard of the concept of hypnotism?"

"No," Luke replied confused. What was Jade getting at now? "What is it?"

"When falling asleep or, as in your case, losing consciousness, the mind is especially susceptible to ideas and suggestions," Jade explained. "Think of it like a trigger; a set of words that was implemented into your mind, and became tied to your memory of being overwhelmed by fonons when you lost control of them on the ship. In Akzeriuth, when those specific words were repeated, your mind recalled that state and brought it into existence. You were subconsciously calling to those fonons, whether you realized it or not. Of course, being in the Sephiroth where Seventh
Fonons are especially concentrated, the effect would have been amplified. It's likely that this is what Dorian General Grants employed against you."

Luke silently contemplated what Jade had just said.

"What I said earlier still holds," Jade added after a moment's silence. "That's a dangerous power you two have. Because of that, you can't go rushing into situations without very carefully thinking them through, something for which you are thoroughly guilty."

"I'm sorry," Luke mumbled while staring at the ground.

"However," Jade continued, "in this case, Asch is probably right. There really wasn't much you could have done to stop it, so don't be so hard on yourself."

"Jade?"

"What is it, Luke?"

"Thank you," the young noble solemnly stated. Jade simply shrugged.

"Now hurry along, we won't have you falling behind and getting lost now."

"I'm coming," Luke replied with a soft smile, following his friends into the sunset.

He had found his way.
Loyalties

The footsteps echoed in the otherwise empty corridor down which Legretta found herself. Despite the fact she was navigating Daath's immeasurable heights, it was a path she could have followed in her sleep. After all, how many times over the past decade had she walked the path to the Commandant's office? More than she could count, but those visits had become much fewer as of late and it was beginning to bother her.

Under her arm, she carried a stack of reports; reports she knew full well would never be read, but it was important to maintain some semblance of order. The Commandant had much more important things to worry about now, and he did worry. So did she.

Legretta knew just how concerned he had become, especially since Akzeriuth's fall. The way he spent hours alone, mulling over everything, ever so carefully ensuring that every piece would fall into place. But with the location of the Fon Master still unknown and the status of the Sacred Flame still not certain, there was much to be concerned about.

However, things were different now. There had been a time when he would confide in her when things became too much to handle on his own. A time when he simply talked to her. When she could offer her advice she would, when she couldn't, she would just listen. Listen and admire his cunning, his flawless way of thinking, and the way he could solve any problem with seemingly no effort at all. His dedication, his passion, the list of traits she admired about him grew every time they met.

But that had changed in the past few years, and most drastically in the past few months. The Commandant never so much a spoke to her anymore unless she addressed him first, and when he wasn't off at one of the Passage Rings, he spent all his time locked away in his office. But she had convinced herself it was all due to stress. His plans were in motion now, and there was no stopping them. It was do or die, and the Commandant was feeling every bit of it. After all, he had taken it upon himself to save the world.

Legretta wasn't surprised to find the Commandant's door closed, a sure sign he didn't want to be disturbed. She hated to be the one to barge in, and she hated even more to be the one to bring him more to worry about, but she had more business with him than the reports she brought.

"Commandant," Legretta stated as she opened the door, "I brought-"

Legretta was cut short by the sight she came upon when she steeped into the Commandant's office. Seated in front of his desk, his hands folded in front of him sat Van. He was intently staring at the intruder, but it wasn't his piercing stare that bothered her. It was the violet-haired God-General that was casually sitting on his desk, leaning back as her hands scattered yesterday's stack of reports across the desk and floor.

"What are you doing here Cantabile?" Legretta demanded, instantly forgetting her original purpose. Cantabile glanced over her shoulder, not that she needed to in order to identify who the intruder had been.

"She's here because I asked her to be," Van stated venomously. "What do you want, Legretta?"

"I brought you these, sir," Legretta managed, indicating the reports she had brought. She was taken aback by the severity of the tone in the Commandant's response.
"Leave them by the door. Is that all you needed?"

"No, sir," Legretta replied, fighting back the meekness that was creeping into her voice as she sat under the Commandant's harsh gaze. "I have other matters to report."

"Then get on with it," Van stated, rubbing his temples and letting out a frustrated sigh.

"First off Tear is still-

"I'm aware of that she is still being held; I will speak with her later. Is that the only reason you have for intruding in my office?" Van cut his subordinate off, his patience very quickly running thin.

"I-I apologize, sir. There is one other matter that has been brought to my attention," Legretta began, attempting to regain her composure. "A spy was captured the other day. We believe he was attempting to investigate Tear's location. We captured him and he was being held for questioning but he has escaped. His allegiances are unknown."

"I'll leave that matter to you then," Van dismissed the issue. "I trust you to deal with it as you see fit."

"Yeah," Cantabile spoke up. "Van's got more important things to worry about. You're more than able to handle a couple spies on your own, aren't you?"

"I don't need to be hearing that from you!" Legretta snapped back.

"Is that all?" The Commandant raised his voice, cutting off their argument before it began.

"Y-yes sir. If you'll excuse me, I'll be on my way," Legretta finished as she quietly exited the room and closed the door behind her.

"Someone's awfully wound up," Legretta heard Cantabile's voice through the door.

"I don't have time to be worrying about her. If she can't pull her own weight, she's worse then useless."

"Oh don't be like that," Cantabile replied. "She's trying-"

"Trying is pointless unless the desired result is achieved," Van cut his companion off. "There's no halfway any more. We can't afford to fail."

"Try not to think about it that way," Cantabile replied softly. "You're worked up and stressed out as it is, and I'm worried about you. You keep this up you're going to run yourself ragged. You need to try and relax a bit. Here…"

Whatever Cantabile was going to say, Legretta would never know, she'd heard more than enough. Why? Why of all people did it have to be her? Why was Cantabile the one he chose to spend all those hours alone with? She was the one that had been by the Commandant's side all these years. But now Van dismissed her as coldly and with about as much consideration as he would treat some lowly foot soldier. She wasn't incompetent; and she most certainly was not useless.

So why did Van suddenly seem to think so? It was her, wasn't it? Legretta refused to allow it. She wouldn't let that witch, that snake, ruin the relationship she had spent all these years building. All those late nights, all those extra hours, all the hardships; everything she had done over the past decade to help the Commandant and his goals, she was not going to let one person steal everything she had worked for out from under her nose.
But everything could easily be fixed. She would just have to remind the Commandant just how able she was, and she knew just how she could accomplish that. There was only one thing the Commandant would want, one person he desperately needed, and she would be the one to bring him in. Legretta would make sure of that.

It wouldn't all be for nothing.

Everything was black; the same empty void that always haunted his dreams. Luke stood alone, in the same spot, lost in the same emptiness. He had to move. He had to go. If he didn’t go, he would never get anywhere. He wouldn't be able to save Tear if he didn't step forward. But he couldn't. What if he fell? If he fell he would never save anyone!

It was the miasma! He was sinking! Cold flesh clutched his limbs as he flailed, dragging him down into the endless sea of poison. He was trapped, doomed to flow among the sea of corpses. No! He couldn't stay here! He needed to go! But the more he struggled, the tighter their grip became. He couldn't move! He couldn't breathe! He-

Luke suddenly awoke, sitting up with a start. Remembering where he was, Luke took a moment to calm himself down, quietly looking around until his breathing matched the steady sounds of everyone sleeping around him. Why did it still surprise him? The same nightmare had haunted his dreams every night since Akzeriuth, and yet each time it felt as terrible as the first. Luke' racing heart finally settled back into its normal rhythm, but he couldn't get back to sleep. So he continued to sit awake and stare into the darkness of the night.

After a moment Luke glanced over his shoulder and spotted Asch behind him. His sibling was still sound asleep, and Luke let out a soft chuckle. The Albiore could probably fall from the sky again and it wouldn't wake Asch up. He was out like a light, and would probably stay that way well past sunrise.

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"Are you alright Asch, you don't look so hot," Ginji commented as they sat around the fire the young pilot had prepared for their return.

"I'm fine," Asch stubbornly replied.

"Yeah right," Luke mumbled sarcastically from beside his sibling. He was still bitter about what had happened earlier; Asch was such a blab. But when Asch didn't retort, Luke couldn't help but steal a glance in Asch's direction. As soon as he looked over, Asch fell unconscious, his head landing right in Luke's lap.

"Asch?" Despite his determination to stay angry with his brother, a wave of worry crashed over Luke. "Asch? Asch?!" Jade placed a hand on Luke's shoulder just as the young noble was about to give Asch a good shake.

"Let him sleep, Luke," Jade explained softly. "That passage ring took a lot of his strength, it's best to just let him rest." Luke looked down at his reflection that was lying in his lap. His chest was rising and falling rhythmically, and he seemed almost...peaceful. Luke sighed, why was it so damn hard to stay mad at him? Fine. So Luke let Asch sleep and they all returned to their previous conversation.

"I'm going to bring him up into the Albiore," Luke stated after an hour of dealing with Asch tossing
"But it would be such a pity to wake him," Natalia spoke up.

"I'm sorry, I didn't think of asking," Luke chuckled. "You probably want to let him borrow your lap." Natalia's face turned red but whatever she mumbled was lost amidst the laughter of the others.

"Don't worry," Luke continued once the laughter had died down. "He's not going to wake up anytime soon." A poke across their connection had told him that much. Jade was right and with the level of pure exhaustion Luke sensed, Asch was going to be out for the night if he didn't sleep well into the next day. Gently, Luke shifted Asch onto his back and with some help from Guy brought him up into Albiore where they laid him down on one of the seats.

"Got it?" Guy asked, tossing Luke a blanket.

"Yeah," Luke answered as he carefully placed the blanket over his older brother. "I'll be right there."

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Truth be told, Luke was glad his nightmares weren't rousing his sibling. Much to his relief, Asch didn't seem to have detected any trace of the distress that his recent string of nightmares had been causing him. Luke only wondered how much longer he could keep it that way.

"Can't sleep?" The blonde's voice broke the dead silence that had blanketed the Albiore. Even though Guy had whispered, the sudden sound made Luke's heart skip a beat. The redhead spun around to see Guy sitting across from him, staring him down from the chair in which the blonde had fallen asleep.

"Not really," Luke whispered back, doing his best to hide the tremor in his voice.

"Hey, are you alright?"


"Has anyone ever told you you're a terrible liar?"

"Yeah," Luke replied, a smile tugging at his lips.

"Did you have a nightmare?" Guy continued his inquiry, knowing full well he'd have to drag it out of his best friend. Across from him, Luke solemnly nodded. "What did you dream about?" Guy tried. Luke was silent, and that could only mean one thing.

"You're dreaming about Akzeriuth, aren't you?" Luke still didn't reply, but the tears that threatened to escape his now shining emerald eyes revealed far more of the truth than he would. Guy berated himself, he should have known better than to think Luke was really over everything that had happened. Luke had just seemed so… okay with it all. When had he learned to put up such a good front like that?

"Okay, well, we can't have that now can we?" Guy quietly stated as he stood up and walked over to Luke.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Luke protested as Guy forced him to lay back down on the bench. Guy
picked up the blanket that had been thrown to the floor amidst Luke's tossing and turning, and tucked it tightly around the young noble. "I'm not two anymore Guy."

"Oh? You remember that?" The blonde guardian inquired and he stood over his charge.

"Yeah," Luke replied, a soft smile gracing his face. "I remember wandering around the manor because I'd be too scared to go back to sleep. Then you would find me, and you bring me back to my room. You'd read me a story and then tuck me in really tight so nothing would get me."

"That was when Asch stopped letting you invade his room at night," Guy chuckled. "Can't say I blame him though, you used to have a lot of nightmares back then didn't you?" Guy sat down on the floor next to Luke's head.

"I guess so," Luke replied as he pulled the blanket up to his chin.

"Well, if you remember that, then you know I'll be right here to wake you up if that nightmare comes back."

"Guy?"

"Hm? What is it Luke?"

"Thank you."

"Good night Luke," Guy said softly as he closed his eyes.

"Good night," the redhead replied as he rolled over and did the same.

Behind them both, Asch smiled, rolled over, and went back to sleep.

With a few final touch ups, Ginji very quickly had them back in the air the next morning. Though the flight was shaky and had Anise clinging to Ion's robes for dear life, things seemed to be running rather well. They had an hour before they were due to arrive in Sheridan, and Jade wasn't one to let that kind of time go to waste.

"So what's the plan for when we land?" Asch inquired, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Despite how tired he was, he was determined to get up with the rest of them.

"That depends on a great deal of things," Jade replied. "Not the least of which being what our dear friend Dorian General Grants is up to."

"Your friend, not mine," Asch mumbled.

"Hold up for a second," Anise butted in, one of her hands still tightly clinging to Ion's sleeve. "Everything happened kind of fast yesterday, and listening to these two argue isn't exactly the best way to get information. Could we recap what exactly is going on? How exactly does any of this trace back to the Commandant?"

"It starts with Akzeriuth," Jade began.

"Wait," Asch interrupted.

"Now what?" Anise demanded exasperated. "You two aren't planning on trying to keep all this


"Because you're the one who lied to them. You owe them the truth."

Luke shot a dirty look back at his sibling, but couldn't come up with any argument to what Asch had said. As peaceful as he had looked while sleeping, he was equally annoying and skilled at being a jerk when he was awake. But with no defence and everyone's attention on him, it looked like Asch had won this one, so Luke took a deep breath and began to tell the story.

It was less detailed than the account he had given to his sibling, or even to Jade for that matter; and Asch was noticing the decreasing level of detail that occurred each time Luke was forced to recount Akzeriuth's demise. He subconsciously wondered how much had already been lost before he had heard the tale the first time. But despite that, Luke was doing well, far better than the mess he had been the first time he'd told it. He simply sat there talking, absent-mindedly petting Mieu who had come and taken a seat in his lap; and everyone listened.

Everyone but Asch. He already knew the words that would come from Luke's mouth, and of everyone on the Albiore, he was the only one whose attention wasn't on Luke, including Ginji who was intently listening as well as he could while ensuring they didn't repeat yesterday's misadventure. No, Asch's focus was directed elsewhere, at a particular blonde member of their group.

But whatever Asch was looking for, he didn't find and he silently cursed Guy for being so difficult to read. The solemn look with which he was regarding Asch's younger brother was impossible to decipher and didn't help Asch out one bit. Asch had hoped to use Guy's reaction to Luke's tale to gauge his loyalties. After all, if he really was working with Van, then none of this should be new to him, in fact, if that were the case, this should please him.

Guy, however, remained as unreadable and impossible as ever, which made Asch very uneasy. It was fine before when everyone didn't really know what they were trying to do, but now, now they would have to divulge the details of their intentions concerning Van. Asch was running out of time, either he found a way to get rid of Guy, which he knew would be impossible to do without devastating Luke, or Asch would have to find it in him to trust the blonde, which was infinitely more difficult. Irregardless of just how hard either option may be, he didn't have long to decide. But for now, he just allowed himself to relax a bit, and listened to Luke talking. It was amazing how much worse the tale became when one already knew the ending.

Anise listened quietly to Luke's story. It seemed so surreal. She had clung to the lies for so long, that the truth just didn't seem right somehow, and yet, she knew it was the truth. Luke's tone, the way his voice was so solemn and quiet, it couldn't be anything else. But that made things a lot more difficult, as her conscience grew more and more restless with every word from the noble's mouth. Beside her, Ion was smiling. How could he be smiling, especially at such a terrible story? But he had always known hadn't he? Ion had known there was something beneath the surface, something the rest of them didn't know or understand; so had Guy for that matter. Must be nice to be able to have that kind of faith in someone.

Next to the young Fon Master Guardian, Natalia sat intently listening to Luke's account, thousands of things racing through her mind. Why had Luke so openly accepted fault for it all? Admittedly, he still partially was at fault, but why hadn't he said anything before now? Or better yet, why hadn't
Asch said anything to her? Surely he trusted her…didn't he? That really was the question. His somewhat distant and uncomfortable demeanour with her lately made it obvious that her attitude towards his sibling was upsetting him. But didn't he understand? Couldn't he see it? He couldn't, not the way she could. He was too closely involved to be able to see the problem, and even if he did, she knew he wouldn't want to do what needed to be done. So that left things up to her. If only she could get through it all without hurting him. Without hurting either of them.

True there may have been times when Luke needed a good scolding, and true, there were times Natalia felt it was best that he be left behind. But that didn't mean that she wanted to see him hurt. He was still a child after all. While Luke may possess the body of a seventeen-year old boy, when all was said and done, he was still only seven. Why should he have to go through these hardships, things that wouldn't even be expected of an adult?

"So let me get this straight," Anise piped in once Luke had concluded his story. "Setting the Commandant aside for a second, you two can make a hyperressonance by yourself?"

"That's right," Asch confirmed, relieving Luke of the attention that had been so intently focused on him. "It was something we were born with. We never told anyone because… well I'm sure you can figure it out. It's dangerous, and it isn't the kind of thing we want kicking around."

"That sort of power would be invaluable in war," Jade provided. "I'm sure if word of that got out, you'd have more than just Dorian General Grants after you for your abilities."

"But not only did Van know, he used that ability to bring down Akzeriuth," Guy concluded mumbling something under his breath that no one managed to catch.

"My concern is what does Dorian General Grants plan to do now?" Jade pointed out. "Though something tells me you two have something or another in mind in that regard, am I right?"

"Yeah," Asch answered. "If Van went through all the trouble of orchestrating Akzeriuth's fall to destroy the Albertesque seal, I think it's reasonably safe to say he's probably the one messing with the Sephiroth and the passage rings."

"Well he is a Seventh Fonist, and being a descendant of Yulia, it's not unreasonable to think that he would have known how to open the Yulian Seal." Jade contemplated.

"But why?" Natalia inquired. "What result is he trying to achieve by putting the Outer Lands in danger like that?"

"I don't know, I really wish I did." Asch stated. "For all we know, he's just trying to fulfill the Score."

"Fulfill the Score?" Ion inquired. "What do you mean by that?"

"Akzeriuth's fall was foretold in Yulia's Score," Asch provided.

"What?!" Anise shrieked. "That's impossible! If that were true than that would mean the king and you guys' father sent Luke to-" Anise cut herself off as the harsh reality of that fact settled over them all.

"I've never heard of such a thing," Ion spoke up, breaking the tense silence. "Unfortunately, I must admit that I'm not very familiar with the contents of the Closed Score. Our current destination is Daath, correct?"

"Well after a short stop in Sheridan, yes," Jade answered.
"If it's not too much trouble, I'd like to verify the Score myself and see if this is true or not. If Van's intentions are indeed related to the Score, it may give us some idea as to what he plans to do next."

"Actually Fon Master," Asch spoke up. "If you're checking the Score, then maybe there's something else you could verify for us as well."

"What is that?"

"We believe that St. Binah might also be in danger of falling, and we'd like you to verify if that's written in the Score or not."

"Why would you think that?" Anise asked.

"I may have overheard the God-Generals talking about it the first time we were in Daath," Asch shrugged.

"I thought I said no night time exploring," Jade commented with a particularly evil look in Asch's direction. He let out a sigh and shrugged. "You just can't help yourself, can you?"

"Why would I want to?"

"Okay you two that's enough for now," Guy intervened. "Right now I'm worried about what Van has in mind. The last thing we need is a repeat of Akzeriuth."

"We still need to go to Baticul," Natalia protested. "If a war breaks out even more people will end up dying!"

"There isn't really much we can do about either case for the time being," Jade calmly stated. "For now let's head for Daath to rescue Tear and check the Score. If we don't get any new leads and there aren't any more pressing concerns, we'll find a way to get to Baticul. Does that sound fair?"

Natalia didn't reply but backed down.

"We should be landing in Sheridan in a few minutes," Ginji called back to them.

"Finally," Anise mumbled under her breath, her words hidden by her sigh of relief.

"Good," Jade replied. "Until we know better, every second counts."

"You're safe!" Tamara excitedly approached the group, not even waiting for them to disembark from the Albiore where Ginji had managed to land it in the hangar. "We saw the Albiore go down and we've been worried sick! We'd have sent a search party if all the soldiers weren't so caught up in fortifying defences."

"Yes, and it's thanks to them that we don't have the parts to repair the Albiore!" Iemon shouted from where he had already installed himself under the airship.

"What do you mean by that Grandpa?" Ginji inquired.

"Well, some of the parts that were damaged in the crash are completely fried now, thanks to your trip back from the Meggiora Highlands. The replacements we need were all used in the construction of landships in preparation for the war."

"Have things really gotten that bad?" Natalia inquired worriedly.
"Well there haven't been any official declarations from either side that we're aware of," Tamara provided. "But both sides are getting ready. Things are pretty tense."

"And without the Albiore we won't be getting anywhere near Baticul," Anise pointed out.

"That's because your ship is a Malkuth landship right?" Ginji asked.

"That's correct," Jade confirmed.

"Wait, you guys have a Malkuth landship?" Aston inquired.

"It may very well have the parts you need," Jade provided, guessing what the man had in mind. It wasn't difficult; the three seniors were ready to pounce on him. "However, we will be needing the Tartarus for our travels, so I can't have you disassembling it on us."

"That's nonsense!" Aston spoke up. "If you'll give us what we need to fix the Albiore here, then you can use her for your journey instead."

"You mean it?!" Ginji inquired excitedly.

"Of course we do," Iemon replied. "Without those parts she's useless anyways, she might as well be fixed and out in the skies. It's not like she'll do us any good just sitting around here."

"Did you hear that Asch?" Ginji turned to the redhead. "You guys can use the Albiore once it's fixed. I'll take you wherever you need to go!"

"That's great and all Ginji," Asch replied hesitantly. "But…"

"But what?"

"But are you sure you know what you're getting yourself into? I mean, we have a long journey ahead of us and there's no saying how long this could take. Are you really sure you want to do this?"

"Ever since I was a kid, it's been my dream to fly around the world," Ginji replied. "I wanted to set off on an adventure that would take me into that endless blue sky and to everything beyond it. This is what I've always wanted, and I get to help out my new friends. What more could I ask for? It'll be much faster than going by land or by sea. Besides, you need a neutral ship to get you to Baticul and Grand Chokmah right?"

"Ginji raises a good point," Ion spoke up. "The Albiore wouldn't be recognized as an enemy vessel by either nation."

"It would definitely be much quicker than the Tartarus," Jade pointed out.

"Excellent!" Iemon jumped in, taking Jade's statement for an affirmative. "We'll just need to retrieve the necessary parts from your ship."

"Alright, I'll take you to the ship," Jade conceded. "Luke, Guy, would you mind lending a hand in carrying some things?"


"Yeah, but…" Luke spoke up for the first time since his story on the Albiore.

"But if we don't have the Tartarus, how are we going to rescue Tear? I mean, how much longer is repairing the Albiore going to take?"

"Don't you worry about that," Ginji provided. "I'll make the arrangements, by the time you get back with those parts, I'll have you guys ready to leave."


"How long will you be?" Asch asked as the trio prepared to leave with Iemon and Aston.

"Probably no more than an hour or two," Jade replied. "Feel free to do whatever you want around town in the meantime."

"We'll be sure to be prepared for when you return!" Natalia called after them.

"Wait! I'm coming with you too Master!" Mieu bounced after Luke.

"Alright, alright come on," Luke stopped allowing the cheagle up on his shoulder before turning and following Guy and Jade.

No one noticed, that neither of the boys had said goodbye.

"So what is it you brought me out here for, Natalia?" Asch asked. Not that he really minded. He and Natalia were seated on a bench near the water, looking out over the horizon. The water was a pristine blue against the clear azure sky, and Asch couldn't help but be entranced by the sparkling waves as they crashed against the cliffs.

"There's something I needed to talk to you about," the young princess replied.

"What is it?" Asch's face became swept with worry when he caught the hint of distress in her voice. Really, he was so sweet that way, always worried about her feelings. She didn't want to hurt him, but she had to know.

"Why is it you never told me about your abilities?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your hyperresonance or whatever it's called, how come you never spoke of it with me?"

"Natalia... you know why. Honestly, I wish no one had ever found out about it. It's dangerous. I mean, you saw what happened in Akzeriuth, and that was with Luke doing everything he could to hold back. Could you imagine what that kind of power could do in war? People would die by the tens of thousands," Asch explained.

"But what does any of that have to do with me?" Natalia demanded, her voice rising. "That's why you haven't told anyone else, why didn't you ever tell me? Don't you trust me?"

"That's not it," Asch replied defensively, doing his best to try and calm her down.

"Then what is it? You told Luke."

"Luke has the same ability, I had to tell him. Besides he's my brother."
"No, he's your replica! And I'm your fiancée! Why does he get to share in all the secrets?"

"Natalia stop it."

"Then answer me Asch! Why don't you trust me?"

"I do trust you, it's just…"

"Just what?" Natalia demanded.

"The last thing I want to see is something like this used in war, in politics. I didn't want Uncle or anyone at the castle knowing, so I decided I wouldn't tell anyone-"

"You think I would have told them? Is that it?!"

"No, Natalia would you listen, I was just trying to- Look, I just don't want to become some weapon in a war-"

"You think I would use you in a war? Do you honestly think that little of me? That I would stoop so low as to sacrifice your secret to some political game?!"

"Is it that hard to believe? If it were to save Kimlasca from war? After all, for all we know, they're planning to execute Tear for treachery in Daath, and you'd rather go to Baticul. You're already willing to sacrifice her to try and prevent war, so is it that hard to believe you'd sacrifice a secret to do the same?"

"Either way, that's not the point!" Natalia shot back.

"Then what is? Because I'm not following you anymore!" Asch shouted, his own temper getting the better of him."

"Don't you see? It's about trust! You don't have any! In me, or in anyone, other than Luke for some reason. How can I trust you, how can I believe in you, when you won't do the same?! I mean, all that stuff about Van and the passage rings. You weren't ever going to tell us, were you? You and Luke were going to run off and play your little games and just leave the rest of us in the dirt!"

Natalia continued to yell, tears already streaming down her cheeks. "You can't treat people that way! We're not tools to use and be discarded when you choose."

"I just didn't want to see you get hurt," Asch quietly stated.

"Well then you're too late."

Natalia turned around, and vanished back into the busyness of town leaving Asch alone to stare at the water. Somehow, it just wasn't as beautiful anymore.

"Where have you been?" Luke inquired as Asch walked into the hangar. Whatever energy he had earlier, had been completely drained. He was dragging his feet and Luke didn't need their connection to know Asch wasn't in a good mood.

"Shut up," Asch shot curtly.

"Fine," Luke rolled his eyes and instead turned to greet Anise and Ion. If Asch wanted to be that way, then let him. He wasn't going to bend over backwards if Asch was set on being a jerk.
"Thanks to the Tartarus, we'll have the Albiore up and running in no time at all!" Tamara proudly declared now that everyone had reassembled.

"Of course, the Tartarus is no longer functioning, as a result," Jade pointed out.

"It's a worthy sacrifice," Iemon stated.

"Yeah, but in the meantime, what are we supposed to do about getting to Daath?" Luke inquired.

"That's where I come in," a young blonde woman spoke up.

"And who are you?" Anise asked somewhat sceptically.

"Guys, this is Noelle," Ginji introduced the girl next to him. "She's my younger sister and the pilot of the Albiore II."

"You mean there are two of these machines?" Natalia inquired.

"Yeah, remember? They were using the flight stone we returned to finish it," Luke provided.

"I knew that," Natalia mumbled, embarrassed she had forgotten such an important fact.

"Noelle here is going to take you to Daath in the Albiore II while we finish the repairs on the first Albiore," Ginji explained.

"It's a pleasure to be working with all of you," Noelle said with a bow.

"You're the one doing us a favour," Guy spoke up, interrupting her mid-bow. "We should be thanking you."

"It's no trouble at all, really," Noelle replied with a smile. "We moved the Albiore II into this hangar so we could take off. If you guys are ready, let's get on board and get going as soon as possible."

"Oh man, not again!" Anise moaned as they walked up the gangplank.

"What is it Anise?" Ion inquired.

"Oh, nothing!" Anise perked right back up.

"Anise?" Natalia began hesitantly, "Are you afraid of flying?"

"N-No! W-Why would you think something like that?"

"Probably because you're shaking," Asch pointed out.

"I am not!" Anise tensed up to hide her trembling as best she could.

"You are so afraid of flying," Asch said with a laugh.

"You guys suck," Anise stated sticking her tongue out at the redhead. "Come on Ion!" Anise's indignant statement had everyone in laughter except Ion who was being forcefully hauled up the gangplank. "Let's go!"
So for the third time in the past month, everyone found themselves standing before Daath's great heights. Though nothing had physically changed about the city, it seemed to become more intimidating each time they returned. The trip in the Albiore had taken them through night and the populace was already well into their daily hustle and bustle.

"Is it just me or does this place get nastier every time we visit?" Anise wondered

"Maybe it's just because our mission keeps getting harder?" Asch suggested, the full night's sleep still not reliving all the traces of his foul mood from the previous day.

"Excuse me," a woman walked up to their group, singling Asch out from the rest of them. "Might you be Master Asch?"

"That's me, what do you need?" Asch replied. He didn't seem the least bit surprised that a complete stranger was picking him out of a crowd in Daath. If anything he seemed exasperated. Just what was Asch up to behind their backs?

"I was asked to deliver this to you from the boss," the lady replied, handing Asch a letter that he immediately opened and read over.

"Did she need anything else?" Asch inquired.

"No. She mentioned she would have liked to see you herself. If not that, then at least meet with you again in the near future."

"Tell her I'm sorry but I'm busy right now. It'll have to wait for another time."

"I will," the lady replied.

"Here," Asch tossed her a gold coin. "Something for your trouble. Thank you for this," he stated holding up the letter.

"It was my pleasure Master Asch," she replied with a bow. "I hope to be of service to you again."

And before anyone could utter another word, she vanished into the morning crowds.

"What was that all about?" Luke inquired.

"Yes, do share," Natalia stated coldly. She couldn't believe it! She had given him the benefit of the doubt last time, but the words out of this woman's mouth seemed pretty clear to her. How could he? After everything he had ever said, all the things he had ever told her, he was seeing some woman in secret! How long had this affair of his been going on?!

"Tear's not in Daath anymore," Asch simply stated, ignoring the harshness in Natalia's response.

"And how is it that you know this?" Jade asked. "Your 'reputable' source again?"

"That's right," Asch replied with a sneer at the taunting tone in Jade's voice. "Tear was held here until yesterday when Van took her away."

"What would the Commandant want with Tear?" Anise inquired.

"Well, she is his sister. Is it possible that he might be trying to gain her assistance?" Ion suggested.

"No way! Tear would never join Master Van! She would never agree to something like that!" Luke protested.
"Easy there Luke," Guy calmed his best friend. "We all know she isn't like that, but for now we have to focus on finding her. Asch, do you know where they took her?"

"No, they're looking into that for me right now."

"Then let's go check the Closed Score," Jade suggested. "Hopefully that should give Asch's 'sources' enough time to find out where we need to head next."

"Where do we have to go to read the Score?" Luke asked.

"The cathedral, in the chapel there's a fonstone enshrined that should be suitable," Ion replied.

"Then let's get going," Guy stated. "The sooner we find Tear, the better."

Despite the fact that this was the third time Luke had been here, he had never actually been in the chapel before. The windows on the far wall towered above them in a myriad of colours. The morning sun filtered through them splashing the entire hall in colour.

"So where is this fonstone supposed to be?" Luke asked curiously, still in awe at the majesty of the Chapel.

"It's enshrined in the altar," Ion replied. "It's actually a special fonstone that was formed by combining fragments of the first six. Fon Masters can read the entirety of the Score from here."

"Ion!" Anise protested. "Are you sure about this? You know you aren't supposed to read the Score; it's bad for your health!"

"Are you sure you're going to be okay?" Luke also inquired worriedly. "You're not going to pass out again are you? Because if you don't think you're up for it, you don't have to…"

"No," Asch argued, "it has to be done."

"Asch!" Luke and Anise's voices simultaneously echoed in the empty chapel. Luke couldn't believe it, just what was Asch's problem?! Sure Asch was always determined to get things done, but since when did he stop caring about the sacrifices along the way? Something was up, and it was more then their little argument.

"It'll be alright Anise, Luke" Ion nodded to each of them as he placed himself in front of the altar. "Thank you, but I'm only going to read the passage concerning Akzeriuth and search for anything about other lands falling. I'll be fine."

Before anyone else could protest, Ion reached out and placed his hands on the altar. The soft familiar flow of Seventh Fonons entered the room and Ion almost seemed to glow.

"ND2000. In Kimlasca shall be born the scion of Lorelei's power. He will be of royal blood with hair of red. He shall be called 'the light of the sacred flame' and he will lead Kimlasca-Lanvaldear to new prosperity."

It was soft at first, just a dull throb at the back of his mind, but as soon as Ion muttered the first word, the splitting pain crashed over them both. Asch and Luke could both see each other tense up, doing their best not to show it. Ion was putting his health at risk to read them the Score, the least they could do was deal with a stupid headache.
Luke was the first one to show any signs of distress. He leaned down over the altar, his elbows supporting his weight, his hands cradling his head. His face was pale, as were the knuckles of his fist as he fought against some unknown pain. Jade watched the boy almost concernedly. What was the matter? After Luke's fall, Asch's front didn't take much longer to break. He placed his hand down on the altar before him to support himself, his free hand clutching his head. Both of them? Just what was going on here?

"ND2002. The one who would seize glory shall destroy the island of his birth, a land named Hod. War shall persist between Kimlasca and Malkuth for a full cycle of the seasons."

'Are you alright?'

Asch looked up and caught Luke's eye. He was fighting to keep a comforting smile on despite the pain that had engulfed him. Here Luke was, struggling against the pain they were in, and he was trying to make him feel better. What had he done? He was upset about his fight with Natalia and had spent the last day taking it out on Luke and everyone else around them.

But why now? Of all times for these stupid headaches to come back, why this moment? What was it about what they were doing that was setting it off?

'Yeah, thanks,' Asch finally answered. 'Just focus on trying to catch what Ion is saying.'

But neither of them had to focus on what the young Fon Master was saying. His voice almost seemed to resonate in their minds. They couldn't hear the worried murmurs of the others around them, but Ion's voice was crystal clear.

"ND2018. The young scion of Lorelei's power shall bring his people to the miner's city. There, the youth will turn power to calamity and be as a weapon of Kimlasca, destroying himself and the city. Thereafter, the land of Rugnica will be enveloped in war, and Malkuth shall lose territory. Kimlasca-Lanvaldear shall thrive, and this shall lead to unprecedented prosperity."

Jade noticed both boys relax as Ion's reading ceased, both struggling to catch their breath, then simultaneously trying to hide it. Just what was it they were reacting to? It bothered him. He knew better than anyone that those headaches of theirs were far from normal. But exactly what was triggering them? Jade suspected it had something to do with the Seventh Fonon. It would explain why they had reacted when Ion read the Score, and it certainly seemed logical, considering their abilities, that they would be sensitive to the Seventh Fonon. But if that was the case, why didn't the Passage Rings seem to pose any problem?


"We're fine, how's Ion?" Luke accepted Guy's help up and made his way to the Fon Master's side.

"I'll be alright," Ion replied faintly, his voice wavering a bit as he wobbled on his feet. "I'll be fine after a little rest. That's all there is on the Sixth Fonstone, there wasn't any mention of other lands falling."

"Thank you Fon Master," Asch said with a smile.


'I think something is seriously wrong here,' Asch replied.

'What? What do you mean by that? How could the Score be wrong?' Luke asked as he picked Ion up and carried him over to the side where he could sit and rest for a bit.
"Well it looks like the Score doesn't say anything about St. Binah," Anise pointed out, interrupting the twin's conversation.

"That doesn't mean nothing will happen," Asch argued.

"Oh, something will happen," Natalia put her hands on her hips. "A war will happen if you don't stop neglecting your obligations. Stop worrying so much about St. Binah and start worrying about Kimlasca."

"Natalia I'm not doing this with you now," Asch stated firmly, keeping his temper in check. "Besides, lives are lives. What country they're from doesn't matter." Asch's last comment quieted the fiery young Princess.

"Regardless, as it stands we've nothing to show that St. Binah is in any form of danger," Jade confirmed. "Though we did ascertain that the Score said Luke was supposed to die in Akzeriuth."

'That's not right though,' Asch commented.

'What do you mean?'

'The Score can't mean you, you weren't born in ND 2000, you were born in ND 2010,' he pointed out.

'Then it must mean you.'

'But I'm not called "the light of the sacred flame" anymore, so that isn't right either.'

'So you're saying the Score is wrong?'

'I think so. The Score hasn't taken your existence into account, which means we can't depend on what it says.'

'But the others didn't…' Luke trailed off.

'The others won't know because they don't know that you're a replica.'

'Yeah but…'

'Luke…you're going to have to tell them.'

'No! No I don't!'

'I know you don't want to, but you have to tell them the truth eventually. We can't do anything about the Score being off until you say something.'

'Oh so you're going to lecture me about telling the truth?' Luke snapped. Asch decided to back off; the topic was obviously a minefield. The last thing he needed was a fight to reveal their connection, which was quickly becoming their last trump card. Besides, with Luke this defensive already, there would be no reasoning with him for the time being. It would have to wait until later.

"Are you sure you're okay to get up?" Mieu asked curiously as he watched the Fon Master stand up from his chair.

"Yes, I'm feeling better now," Ion smiled at the little cheagle. "We should hurry; Tear might be needing our help."

Asch opted to take the lead and was directly followed by Guy, next to whom was walking Luke and Ion, with Anise in tow and Jade and Natalia taking up the rear. They quickly made their way across the glittering chapel. But as Asch opened the two large doors that led out into the Cathedral, he froze, finding himself face to face with a blonde God-General, her pistols drawn and one was pointed directly at his head.

"Asch!" Luke cried but before he had made it two steps, Legretta's second pistol was out and on the other redhead.

"Don't move," Legretta's voice was stern and Luke didn't dare even breathe, for fear of what she may do with her other gun that remained not an inch from Asch's skull.

"What is it that you want?" Jade asked calmly.

"What do I want? That's funny Necromancer. This has nothing to do with what I want. It never does. It's about what he wants, or to be more precise who he wants."

"Let Asch go!" Anise yelled.

"I can't do that. You see this is my chance. If I bring you to him, the Commandant will finally stop believing her lies and he'll see who is truly loyal to him. He'll remember my skill and value, and he'll forget all about her."

"Her?" Guy mumbled.

"I would do anything for him!" Legretta's voice was steadily climbing, starting to waver as she spoke. "I would die for him! But every time I see him, he's with her! So this is the only way, the only way he'll ever look at me again."

Asch's breathing had gotten heavier, though he didn't dare speak. Legretta's arms were trembling in anger now, all it would take is a single upset and she would fire. Asch knew he should try and grab the gun, but fear glued him to the spot. He didn't want to die! And even if he got out of the way, what if she fired at Luke?

"I could shoot you," Legretta continued her ranting, her voice beginning to border on downright insanity. She seemed to revel at the thought, playing with the idea. "Then he'd know how it feels. To have someone you need ripped away."

"Then why haven't you?" Jade spoke up. "From what I hear, it isn't like you to hesitate. If you really wanted to kill him, you would have done so the moment he opened that door."

"Colonel!" Anise hissed. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"Don't mock me Necromancer! The only reason you're alive," Legretta turned to Asch, "is that he needs you. But you know that already, don't you? He needs you to save this world, a world plagued by an illness known as the Score, doomed to die. But Van will save it, he is the medicine we so desperately need. But to do that, he needs you. Not me, you. Why? Tell me why. Why doesn't he ever need me?!"

"Watch out!"

In the sudden flurry of movement, the only sound that was heard was that of the shot fired, and of blood splattering on the ground.
How had all this happened? Asch had just opened the door. Now there was a gun on him, a gun on Luke, and the rest of them didn't dare breathe for fear of what Legretta might do. She certainly had a few screws loose, but what Guy didn't understand was why? Legretta was Van's most loyal ally. She was cold, strong, determined, and never showed any signs of emotional weakness. At least that was what he had heard, and yet here she was on the verge of an emotional breakdown. And the thought of her having a breakdown while holding a gun on Luke and Asch, didn't appease Guy in the least.

The question was why? What had driven her to the point of compromising Van's plans like this? According to what she said, Van needed Asch for something, so why was she here with a gun to his head? And she sure as hell looked ready to fire. It was all about this her Legretta kept mentioning, and Guy had a sneaking suspicion he knew exactly who she meant. The God-Generals were the only ones close enough to Van to have put Legretta in this state, and only three of those God-Generals were female. One was standing distraught before them, and Guy was pretty damn sure it wasn't Arietta.

But there were more important things right now, Legretta was getting shaky. So was Asch for that matter, and Guy couldn't blame him with a gun to his head and a woman ready to lose it with her finger on the trigger. Legretta's voice was getting more and more desperate, more unstable, and then…without even thinking, he reacted.

"Watch out!"

The pain flew up his arm like wildfire as the bullet implanted itself in his muscle. Blood splattered on the floor and all over Asch's jacket as Guy landed protectively over the redhead. Taking advantage of the chaos, Luke jumped out of Legretta's line of fire, protectively covering Ion who had still been standing next to him.

"G-Guy?" Asch managed, turning to see who had knocked him to the ground and out of harm's way. His eyes were open in shock as if he couldn't believe who he saw. Guy didn't blame him, he couldn't believe it either. He had just…reacted, and in spite of the agony his arm was in, he couldn't honestly say he regretted it. It seemed that when it came down to it, he just couldn't let Asch get hurt.

"What's going on in here?!" An older man burst into the Chapel. He looked around and stopped short at the sight he came upon. "Fon Master? What the- Major Legretta stand down!"

Damn! Legretta quickly put away her weapons. She hadn't intended to actually fire! But in the flurry of movement, she had just reacted. Thankfully the blonde corrected her mistake by taking the shot. She had come here simply to retrieve the Sacred Flame for the Commandant, to help him in his plans, and she would have been lying if she didn't admit she also wanted to prove herself in his eyes. To show him he didn't have to worry so much, that she would ensure everything would work out for him. But she had foolishly allowed that damn Necromancer play with her emotions. It was just that every time she thought about the Commandant with that witch… something about it made her furious. But that wasn't an excuse. Her feelings had bettered her judgement, and this was the result. Failure. There certainly wasn't any point in sticking around now.

Legretta vanished before anyone had even realized what had happened.

"Maestro Tritheim," Anise spoke up, her voice still quivering from everything that had just
happened.

"Cantor Tatlin, Fon Master, where have the two of you been?" Tritheim asked worriedly as he helped Ion to his feet. "First you vanished, then we heard about Akzeriuth and feared the worst, especially when you didn't promptly return."

"I apologize," Ion replied. "I left Daath of my own volition. I've been working with everyone here to try and put a stop to the impending war between Malkuth and Kimlasca. There have been people within the Order working against us, so I hope you'll forgive us for not reporting our activities."

"Well I'll apologize on Major Legretta's behalf; I'm not sure what got into her. He isn't here at the moment, but rest assured I will be having a word with Commandant Grants about this when he returns."

'Well that'll do about as much good as a Fifth Fonist at a passage ring,' Asch commented causing Luke to snicker.

'Well at least we confirmed he isn't in Daath anymore,' Luke replied.

"You're still bleeding," Asch pointed out to the blond guardian as he helped Guy sit up.

"I'm alright," Guy managed.

"Oh shut up, you are not alright," Asch protested.

"Natalia, do you think that you could heal him?" Luke asked the princess who was already examining the wound from a distance.

"Well, let's see," Natalia knelt down closer. "I could heal the tissue, but I can't heal it around the bullet, it'll get infected. I'll have to…"

Natalia reached out but before her wandering hand had found Guy's injured arm, the patient in question practically jumped a foot in the air before taking shelter behind Asch.

"Honestly Guy," Natalia nearly fell over backwards in surprise at his sudden flurry of movement. She hadn't completely forgotten but… "Even when you're hurt and bleeding?"

"I-I'm sorry, I can't help it," Guy replied apologetically.

"Oh come here. I'll do it, you wuss." Asch didn't even wait for Guy to reply before pulling the blond in question towards himself. He tried to roll up the left sleeve, but when it wouldn't roll up enough to be able to easily access the injury, Guy had to temporarily abandon the top altogether.

"Thanks Asch," Guy said quietly, watching the redhead who was examining the bleeding wound. He was trying to figure out how best to approach the situation.

"Don't thank me quite yet," Asch replied. "This is going to hurt. A lot."

Asch carefully braced Guy's arm in one hand and placed his other near the wound. Under his fingers Asch noticed a rather peculiar scar. It was faint; an injury long healed…or was it? Asch's eyes followed the faint lines and it led him through a multitude of curves and swirls, tracing the strangest pattern over the entire top half of Guy's arm.

It was the curse slot. The realization suddenly dawned on Asch and the memory of a strange pattern of blood on Guy's pristine white shirt back in the ports of Baticul suddenly came to mind.
Asch had almost completely forgotten of its existence, but then they hadn't completely settled that particular issue now had they? Guy may still be a risk, whether he wanted to be or not. Asch couldn't even imagine how terrible something like that must be, forced to do something against your will…and to live with the knowledge that you could be forced to hurt those you care about at any moment.

"You ready?" Asch inquired, breaking free from his train of thought.

"Yeah," Guy replied. Asch could feel him tense up in anticipation of the pain, and unfortunately it would come. But it was necessary and all Asch could do was make sure it didn't last very long.

Luke could only watch as Guy bit his lip in effort not to cry out. He admired the strength his best friend was showing, and even more so the calm and cool-headedness with which Asch was handling the situation. Had it not been for Guy's sudden action….Asch would have died. Asch had to be shaken up; the thought of it alone rattled Luke's nerves, and the younger sibling was doing his best not to show it. But if Asch was shaken, he wasn't showing any signs of it. He was working quickly and efficiently, and a minute later he held up the result, a single silver bullet that he held between his bloodstained fingers.

Natalia didn't waste any time closing up the wound, being careful not to touch Guy who was jumpy enough as it was. Without the bullet there, it was nothing more than a simple cut, except not quite as long, and much deeper. Guy let out a huge sigh as the pain finally dissipated with the last of the Seventh Fonons Natalia had infused.

"Thanks," Guy offered again as he pulled his shirt back down over his head. He swung his arm around a couple times, he felt as good as new.

"Don't thank me," Asch protested. "I should be the one thanking you. You saved my life." It was the closest thing Asch would come to any sort of reconciliation.

That's when the full impact of everything that happened dawned on Luke. Guy could have died. That bullet hit his arm, but a split second later and he may not have been so lucky. In spite of everything that had happened between them over the years, Guy had risked his life to save Asch. Maybe there was hope for them yet.

"I'm glad to see no one was injured beyond repair," Tritheim broke the tense silence that seemed to echo in the vastness of the chapel. "I am truly sorry about this Fon Master."

"That's alright," Ion shook his head. "Actually, perhaps you could be of assistance to us."

"Anything, Fon Master."

"Did Van happen to mention where he was going before he left?"

"I'm afraid not," Tritheim replied.

"Okay then, thank you for your help," Ion said with his usual soft smile. "I'm afraid we must be on our way. I'm sure you've heard the rumours, we still have a great deal of work ahead of us."

"I have, I wish you the best of luck," Tritheim nodded towards them as everyone began to file out of the chapel.

"Oh one last thing," Ion turned back before he had gotten to the door. "Could you please try and keep the fact that we were here, as well as our intentions as quiet as possible? I'm well aware of how quickly word spreads through Daath, and that you can't stop the rumours entirely, but if you
could keep them to a minimum it would be appreciated."

"I'll do what I can, Fon Master," Tritheim replied with a slight bow. But before Ion could thank him, the large chapel doors slammed shut.

"So now what?" Anise asked.

"Well if this Tritheim doesn't know where we can find Commandant Grants," Jade spoke up, "then we'll just have to wait for-"

"Ah there," Asch cut the Colonel off, turning his attention to someone making their way through the crowds. It was a boy this time, but the letter in his hand was virtually identical to the one Asch had received earlier, right down to the colour of the seal on the back.

"Asch?" The young teen inquired.

"That's right," Asch replied and accepted the letter from the boy. "Thank you." The teen smiled and vanished back into the crowd.

"What does it say? Where are they keeping Tear?" Luke asked eagerly, looking over his brother's shoulder as he attempted to read the letter. Asch shooed his impatient sibling away as he glanced over the information he had been given.

"Jade," Asch finally spoke up. "Have you ever heard of a place called 'Ortion Cavern'?" Jade pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. Asch could have sworn he saw a spark of laughter in the old man's eyes, but it was gone far too quick to be sure.

"There is a cave along the southern edge of the continent Sheridan is on," Jade explained. "It's abundant with a mineral called fonimin that's used in fomicry. I can't be sure, but I believe it goes by that name."

"If it's close to Sheridan, Noelle could probably tell us for sure," Asch replied.

"But why would Van bring Tear there?" Anise inquired.

"I have no idea," Asch shrugged. "But there's only one way we're going to find out."

"So you guys noticed it too." Guy contemplated aloud, being sure to keep his voice down. Not that anyone was likely around to overhear them, especially with the door to the cabin closed and everyone else sitting behind the cockpit; but the topic itself seemed to beget secrecy.

Guy had been surprised when Asch had pulled him aside and asked to talk to him in private, leaving even Luke behind. Asch was the last person he expected to want to have any sort of conversation with him. But what really blew the blond away was the topic the redhead had chosen to discuss.

"Yeah," Asch solemnly replied, also keeping his voice down.

"I thought there was something odd about that Score, it just doesn't fit. But you think the entire thing might be off-track?" Guy too had picked up on the slips, the slight flaws in the Score Ion had read, and he was glad he wasn't the only one to notice. He and Asch had just finished a rather lengthy discussion on the topic, but he couldn't quite bring himself to grasp the entirety of the
"I think it's possible. The Score doesn't consider Luke at all, and nothing happened in Akzeriuth like it was supposed to. Of course, if that's the case, then the Score Ion read for us means absolutely nothing," Asch pointed out.

"You're still worried about St. Binah," Guy realized.

"Yeah, I am. I won't let anyone else die like that; I don't think Luke could handle it." The memory of Luke's state after Akzeriuth still haunted Asch. It had rattled him, far more than he'd ever admit. For the first time, he actually believed he might lose his little brother, and he almost had. Asch refused to run that risk ever again. "Well…" Asch spoke up after a moment, "that's not the only reason…"

"Why don't you try talking to the others about it?" Guy suggested.

"I can't unless Luke will admit he's a replica, and we both know that won't be happening any time soon."

"Point taken," Guy said with a chuckle. "Is that why he's in a bad mood again?"

"Yeah," Asch admitted, "I tried talking to him about it on the way back to the Albiore but it didn't go over so well."

"Do you want me to try talking to him about it?" Guy offered.

"You can if you want. I didn't have any luck, but you're more than welcome to give it a shot."

"Hey Asch, can I ask you something?"

"What is it?" The redhead replied with a bit of a smirk.

"Why are you talking to me about all this?"

"Well Luke certainly doesn't want to talk about it," Asch shrugged.

"That's not what I mean."

"Then what do you mean?" Asch teased, but Guy maintained his serious air.

"Come on, you know what I mean. This is probably the most civil conversation we've ever had. You haven't trusted me with a single thing since you were ten," Guy stated, "and rightfully so. Why now? It's not like you have to trust me with all this so-"

"But I do," Asch cut the blond off. All the traces of his smirk and hints of the teasing he had been doing instantly fading leaving a rather solemn young noble behind. "What you did seven years ago, everything that happened before then…it was a long time ago. I don't know or understand why you did what you did, but you've proven yourself time and time again. I'm the one that can't let go. For Luke's sake, if for nothing else, I have to get over this."

"Is this because you're asking Luke to tell the truth?"

"How can I ask him to face his fears if I can't even face my own?" Asch looked up at Guy, his face wearing a sad smile.

Guy was at a complete loss for words. Just what was he supposed to say to something like that?
Even though Asch still didn't understand Guy's motivation, even after all the horrible things he had done, and they had been horrible, Asch had just pretty much told Guy that he'd trust him. Oh sure there was the kidnapping, and that alone should be enough to keep anyone from trusting him ever again, but in reality that wasn't even the start of it.

How many years had he served under Duke Fabre after the fall of Hod before Van's plan to take the man's only heir... six? Maybe seven? In that time he had been sure to make Luke fon Fabre's life as miserable as he possibly could. After all, everything would be so much easier if the brat hated his guts, and he certainly returned the feelings. But now, Asch had gone beyond all that. He had proven himself the better person and Guy stood before him completely and utterly defeated.

"Asch," Guy hesitantly began. "Maybe I could explain a few things..."

Anise happily bounced her way towards the back of the Albiore. The Sheridan-build craft was a lot bigger than it looked on the outside, and Anise still hadn't quite explored the entire thing. While it didn't have near the room the Tartarus did, there were still a bunch of cabins down a hall that was behind the cockpit and seating area. The cabins were pretty cramped though; they really weren't good for much other than sleeping, and the odd private discussion. Pretty much everyone spent their time in the seating area behind the cockpit, and left the rooms for after the sun set. After all, even though the Albiore was way faster than the Tartarus was, it wasn't like it took them places instantly. Longer journeys could easily take a few days, that and Noelle and Ginji needed a place to crash too. Anise shuddered at the thought, that wasn't what she meant.

But for now the cabins made a great place to have a private conversation, away from the ears of the rest of the group. But those kinds of conversations just demanded to be listened in upon! Who wouldn't be tempted to just press their ear up against a door? But after what the Colonel had done to her the last time he caught her eavesdropping, she wouldn't be doing it again any time soon. She wasn't up for getting into that kind of trouble again. But still... first it was Asch and Guy, then Guy and Luke, now Luke and Asch had both vanished. A girl couldn't help but wonder! But eavesdropping wasn't her mission this time. Luke was back here somewhere, and she had something for him that was long overdue: an apology.

Anise placed her hands on her hips and eyed the four doors before her. She decided to start with the door to her left through which she could hear muffled voices. Sound didn't carry well through these walls, so whoever was talking, wasn't bothering to keep their voice down. Anise tried knocking softly, and then a little harder; but when neither got a response, she simply opened the door and walked right in.

"So now you're pitting my best friend against me too?!" Luke shouted at his sibling who was standing right in front of him. They were both oblivious to the intruder.

"That isn't what this is about! This is about you and the truth! And about both of us wanting what's best for you!" Asch shouted back.

"Hey guys?" Anise stepped in.

"When did I ask you to look out for what's best for me?! I'm not a baby! I can look after myself just fine!"

"Stop twisting every single little thing I say before I-"
"Before you what?!!"

"Hey!!" Anise yelled, drawing the attention of both boys. "I don't know what you're fighting about, but is it really that important? You already exceeded your fighting limit for the week," Anise said matter of factly. "So you aren't allowed to fight until at least next Rem-day."

Both twins sent each other a particularly evil look, but didn't say another word and Luke promptly stormed out of the room. Well at least they had stopped.

"Wow, I haven't seen you two that mad since the trip to Chesedonia," Anise mumbled more to herself than anything. Asch simply scoffed at her comment. "What was that you were saying to Luke about the truth? Are you two keeping secrets again?"

"Of course not," Asch dismissed her altogether.

"You come off really nasty sometimes, you know that?" Anise's cheeks puffed up showing she was fed up with Asch's better-than-everyone attitude. But the silence that ensued her comment calmed her down a bit and she resumed in a calmer tone. "You're always so cold, and closed off all the time. How do expect anyone to trust you if you never open up a bit?" Asch didn't reply.

"Anyways," Anise spoke up after a moment, "Luke was the one I was looking for so I'm going to go find him. I'll see you later." Anise held the door open for a moment hoping to get some sort of reply out of the redhead. Even a "goodbye" would have sufficed.

But Anise never got so much as a word, so she continued on her way.

"Luke?" Anise poked her head in the room furthest from the one Asch had been in and spotted the twin she was looking for laying down on the bed, staring intently at the ceiling.

"Oh, hey Anise," Luke sat up to greet his visitor. "Did you need me for something?"

Anise stepped into the room and shut the door behind her. The change in Luke's demeanour was astounding and a stark contrast to his gloomy half down the hall. Anise just couldn't get over the difference. Luke was so open and easy to talk to, even when he was still upset over what had just happened. Asch just… closed himself off. Anise wondered why there was such a difference between the two of them.

"Yeah actually..." Anise hesitated. Suddenly all the words froze in her throat, and the courage she had built up over the past day fled her. She had gone over what she would say countless times in her head, but suddenly none of it seemed like enough. Why was it so hard to just admit she had been wrong?

"What is it?" Luke asked, his face dawning a heart-warming smile. Anise took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry!" She blurted out with a bow.

"What for?" Luke was dumbfounded by the young Fon Master Guardian's actions.

"For everything. After Akzeriuth, all those nasty things I said, the way I treated you… I'm sorry. You can hate me if you want to, I wouldn't blame you one bit," Anise said, not able to bring herself to look Luke in the eye. He hated her, she knew it. How could he not after the way she had treated him?
"It's okay," Luke replied softly. "You don't have to apologize like that, if I had been in your spot, I probably would have acted the same way."

Anise understood the intentions behind Luke's statement, but she knew it was a lie. He wouldn't have acted like that. He probably would have given her the benefit of the doubt, and even if he didn't, he would have still treated her decently, maybe even forgiven her. But she had harassed him, excluded him, and done everything she could to remind him of what he had done when in reality, he was already feeling that burden and bearing the guilt of what he had been forced to do. That realization made everything that much worse.

Luke didn't know what to say when Anise landed in his arms and held him close. She pressed up against him, squinting her eyes shut, hoping it would stop the flow of tears. After a moment, Luke gently held her back. He didn't harbour any ill feelings against Anise. Some of the things she had said and done had hurt, but it had also been partially a result of his lies. He hadn't stood up for himself, and they had both gotten hurt. Holding it against her now would only result in more pain, and probably destroy what friendship they had managed to rebuild. So Luke simply let it go; allowing it to vanish into this moment, Anise smiling, lost in his friendly gesture, with tears still slipping down her face. Luke brushed a few strands of her ebony hair out of her face.

"I'm sorry too."

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*Drip. Drip. Drip.*

Water was constantly moving here. It flowed through the cave, and over the rocks, hung from the ceiling, and dripped to the floor. It covered the stones of the otherwise dimly lit cavern giving them an almost rainbow-ish hue. Or perhaps that was how the stones naturally occurred, there really wasn't any way of telling, anymore than there was time to worry about such trivial things.

Then again, if it wasn't for the company that she kept, Tear probably would have enjoyed the journey into Ortion Cavern. She walked a well lit path, the torches on the walls making the rocks sparkle all around her. It was truly an amazing sight. But for Tear, this particular journey was far from magical.

Her brother was leading the way, taking them into the cavern's seemingly infinite depths. Tear couldn't help but wonder exactly what her brother had set up in such a remote place. He hadn't told her much, just that he needed to speak with her and that he had something important to show her, not a word more. But what could that be? She hadn't even seen him since they were last in Baticul, setting out for Akzeriuth, and that felt like a lifetime ago.

Akzeriuth… That was another topic on her mind. In spite of her rapid and rather pitiful capture, Tear had done her best to try and gather what information she could while she was in Daath. What had really happened? Had her brother really been there? He had to have been, he saved Asch. But if he was around to save Asch, why didn't he save anyone else? Just how involved was he?

"Didn't have anything to do with it?! Van-"

Asch knew something, but something had stopped him from divulging what he knew. She should have asked him about it when she had the chance, but she was so mad at him for abandoning Luke, that she couldn't be bothered. Were those two okay? Had they even found each other? What would have happened between them even if they had? Tear sighed; she just didn't have any answers. All she could do was hope that would change very soon.
If she got any answers, they would be coming from Van. Though her brother had dismissed the majority of their accompanying guard, telling them to go hide their ship and await further orders; there were still two Oracle Knights accompanying them, and there was no chance of her escaping. Even if it was possible for her to overcome Largo, Sync would catch her with ease. But those two had some other purpose here, of that she was sure. Tear highly doubted she alone merited such a dignified guard; after all, it hadn't taken half a dozen Oracle Knights to bring her in. So she simply walked in silence.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

They had hit a dead end, the tunnel through which they had proceeded thus far opened into a huge rock chamber before ending completely. Up against the far wall, several huge fon machines rested from the vigorous work their beat up state suggested they were usually forced through. Several cells were laid into the walls themselves, and Tear thought she caught a glimpse of movement from one of them, but dismissed it as an overactive imagination. Just what was all of this, and what was her brother using it for?

"What is this place?" Tear finally dared ask.

"This is where everything begins," Van said turning to face his little sister. "Mystearica, it's time you learned the truth."

Thankfully, Noelle knew exactly how to get to Ortion Cavern. She landed the Albiore gently in the water and bringing them right to the cave's entrance. It wasn't nearly as easy to handle in the ocean as it was in the air, but the perky young blonde quickly adapted. She was as talented as her brother had proven to be.

But now they were all hurrying through the caverns. Between the water and all the crystals in the walls, the reflected light gave the place an almost eerie feel. No, he had to focus. Luke brought himself back to the task at hand: rescuing Tear, which wasn't going to be easy, especially if Master Van was there with her. Would they have to fight him? Luke didn't know if he was ready for that. If it came down to it, did any of them really stand a chance?

Stupid! Luke berated himself, he could worry about that when they found her. He hurried along, keeping his eyes peeled for any signs that Van may have taken Tear off the lit path, but there weren't any, so everyone continued forward. It was his fault that she had been captured in the first place. If he hadn't been such an idiot back in Yulia City she might even be with them right now. If she got hurt… no he wouldn't let that happen. He swore he wouldn't let anyone get hurt again, but Tear was special somehow, his concern for her extended even beyond that. Luke picked up his pace. He was coming, and she had better be alright.

"What do you mean Akzerith's fall was in the Score?" Tear exclaimed, her voice betraying her growing distress. Her and Van's conversation hadn't touched on easy topics, and she was at her wit's end. It just couldn't be true… none of it. It was impossible. She wouldn't believe it!

"Exactly what I said," Van replied, his voice soft but firm. "Ingobert, Duke Fabre, Mohs, they were all aware of what was going to happen, and well in advance. Yet look at them, how many people did they bother to save? Not one. Then, not only did they condemn the whole city to death, but
they sent Luke to go die there with them.

"No…"

"But they did, and Luke knew this. Ask him if you'd like. Ask how he felt, being sent to die by those he loved. And for what? To fulfill some worthless prophesy."

Luke knew? Tear couldn't even form words. No wonder he had been so upset the entire way there. He was carrying a death sentence, shackled by everyone he cared out and their expectations of him. That was just... too cruel.

"Let's not forget Hod," Van continued. Tear looked away. How could she forget Hod? Especially after everything he had just told her about it. She wished he would just stop talking about it... it was just... too much. She couldn't take it anymore. "All those people suffered, for no other reason than the fact they would die anyways. Experimented upon, ripped of their dignity, and their pride, only to be silenced as the people responsible watched and laughed. Come with me, Mystearica. Come help me overturn the Score that does nothing but condemn people to death."

"Even so!" Tear finally protested, her eyes bordering on tears. "Why are you doing all this?! Maybe people have done terrible things to fulfill the Score, but that still doesn't justify what you're planning!"

"Mystearica, even after everything I've just told you. Even after Akzeriuth, and everything that happened on Hod, you still truly believe that?"

"You keep saying, 'after all that happened on Hod'!" Tear yelled, her mind racing. So many emotions coursed through her all at once and confusion clouded her judgement. Tear didn't know how she should feel... what she should believe anymore... but this, at the very least, was crystal clear to her. "Yet you're the one who's turning around and using fomicry! All it does is bring pain and suffering! Why?! Please stop all this, there has to be some other way!"

Please don't let it take away the last family I have left....

"There isn't," Van's cold reply made Tear's heart sink. She had lost them all. All to... to this...

"Mystearica..." he continued, "if you still can't see the-

"Tear!" Luke's voice echoed in the open chamber, cutting Van off. The Commandant looked up at the intruders but didn't even register them as a concern. Even if the entire motley crew was here, they were far from being a threat. No sooner had the thought grazed his mind did Sync and Largo block the group's access into the room. Pity, it appeared his time had run out. He hadn't managed to make his sister see the truth of the Score, but what had resulted from their lengthy discussion... should prove interesting enough. She would come to see things his way eventually.

"Let her go!" The original's voice met Van's ears.

"Shouldn't you be asking her if she even wants to come with trash like you?" Sync taunted, his gaze fixed on Luke who was ready to take the green-haired boy head on if he had to. "Maybe she prefers her current company."

"Tear!" Luke called out but the young melodist didn't look up. Her back was still turned and she had done nothing to acknowledge their presence.

"Quite presumptuous," Largo commented. "You seem to think everyone in the world revolves around you."
"Oh shove it," Anise spoke up. "Even if Tear doesn't want to hang out with us anymore, she'd still enjoy the company of a rock more than she'd like hanging out with you all day."

"Let us through," Asch stated venomously, the threatening tone in his voice unmistakable.

"Getting violent, are we?" Jade shrugged as he armed himself. There really wasn't any avoiding it. The others didn't waste much time following suit.

"Heh," Sync smirked. "Rather than worry about us, perhaps you should be more concerned about attacks from behind."

"What?" Luke didn't even have time to consider what Sync meant before Asch crashed into him, knocking him to the ground and just out of reach of Guy's swing.

The blonde's eyes were vivid and full of hatred. Leaving Luke on the ground, Asch challenged the attacker, carefully luring him around the edge of the chamber, and away from everyone else. Asch swiftly dodged Guy's attacks, and countered only as necessary. It wasn't an especially difficult task, Guy really didn't seem to be thinking anything through. Luke recognized it immediately. Dammit! It was the curse slot again.

"Don't let Van get away!" Asch called back to the group, ducking to avoid another swing.

"We're kinda busy!" Anise yelled back as she swung around the towering God-General that had chosen to take advantage of the sudden chaos. Jade was backing her up, but Largo's wide swings were keeping him from having time to cast and kind of arte. Luke managed a couple artes, but nothing that succeeding in doing much damage through the man's thick armour. He switched to a physical offence but had little more success.

Natalia did her best to cover for Ion, while attempting to distract Sync. With everyone busy, no one noticed exactly when Van slipped away; leaving his sister fixated to the same spot she had been in when they had found her.

"Time to retreat," Sync stated a few minutes later. "Be grateful, you can keep your pitiful lives awhile longer."

Sync was gone in the flash of an eye leaving Largo who backed up defensively before vanishing down the same tunnel. Everyone let out a sigh of relief and surveyed the damage. Across the room Guy had collapsed, much like the first time and an uninjured Asch was sitting him up against the wall, before joining the rest of them. No one had sustained any major damage, but they were all exhausted, even from such a brief encounter. They were far from the skill they would need to face the God-Generals on equal ground.

"Tear, are you alright?" Luke asked worriedly.

"I'm fine," Tear replied somewhat coldly.

"You certainly don't sound fine," Natalia pointed out. It was the truth; Tear's maelstrom of emotions clearly echoed in her voice.

"What did Van tell you?" Asch asked.

"Asch!" Natalia protested, hitting him in the chest with the back of her hand. "That is none of your business!"

"You know…the Score said Hod would fall, just like Akzeriuth," Tear began. "I had always known
that, so did my brother. But... to think... they would go as far as that." Tear tensed up to hide the fact she was on the verge of trembling in anger. No one could judge her expression seeing as her back was still turned, but they didn't have to see to know she was on the verge of tears.

Why was she telling them this? Tear stared intently at the ground, but she could feel the presence of her friends behind her. Maybe she wanted to talk to sort out her feelings amidst the storm of emotions that still hung over her. Then again, maybe she just wanted someone who would listen, someone to talk to, someone who would understand...

"I..." Tear's voice wavered.

"Tear..." Luke walked up behind her and gently extended a comforting hand.

"I hate fomicry!"

Luke's hand froze an inch from where he had planned to place it comfortingly on her shoulder.

"Anyone who would do that to all those innocent people... They didn't matter to anyone, why not make them suffer? Why not use them for fomicry experiments? Why not try and make a bunch of stupid replicas?! Those people were going to die anyway so they don't matter; their feelings are completely meaningless, right? But that's not true, they were my parents, they mattered to me!"

Luke's hand was trembling as he retracted it and took a few steps back. None of them had ever heard Tear so upset or angry before. But then again, none of them had ever heard her speak of anything personal either.

"My father..." Tear continued, slowly calming down. She finally turned around to face the others. "He died...he died because someone extracted his replica data." Though she had calmed down, her voice still wavered, threatening to break at any moment, just like the melodist to whom it belonged.

"Is that even possible?" Anise inquired incredulously.

"I'm afraid so," Jade confirmed. "The process of extracting replica data can have a negative effect on the original, and it's not uncommon for the subject to die somewhere along the way."

"I never knew..." Tear replied, pausing for a moment before she was able to continue. "It happened just before I was born. Not long after my mother had me, she died too. You know how she died? She died of a broken heart. She wasted away for months waiting for him, hoping he'd return! But he never did! Because some researcher decided his life was meaningless!"

"So you lost your parents to the fomicry research that took place on Hod," Natalia said gently. "It's no wonder you hate it. I can't say I'd feel any differently."

"The people of Hod were treated like cattle! Simply because the Score said they would die. I'll never forgive those who took advantage of that! Fomicry creates nothing but pain and suffering, nothing good can possibly come of it!"

Asch stood next to Luke, his hand resting on his replica's shoulder. He couldn't understand the melodist; it seemed so unlike her to take such a radical view point. Perhaps it was because fomicry had never been a sore subject for him that he couldn't see where she was coming from. Then again, he had Luke. She didn't have anyone, and had her entire family ripped away from her. Her hatred was well founded, but that didn't make it any easier to swallow.

"Tear, I know you lost your family," Asch began. "But don't you think..."
"It's not just that," Tear replied, her attention so focused on Asch, she didn't notice the state his twin was in. "Why? If there had been a reason, it might be easier. All those experiments, all that pain, that sadness… for what? Some stupid replicas? What good is a replica? They don't have any of the memories we shared. They can't bring my parents back to me, they can't talk any sense into Van. They can't bring back all those that died… nothing. Fomicry shouldn't even exist!"

"If you don't mind my asking," Jade interrupted, doing his best to keep attention away from the redheads who had retreated a few steps. Even he felt for the poor boy… from Tear of all people. "If you so strongly believe in everything Commandant Grants said, then why didn't you go with him?"

"My brother is trying to use fomicry for his own ends. I just can't accept that," Tear replied with a surprising amount of conviction. When it came down to it, fomicry had destroyed her entire family. First it killed her parents, now it had taken her brother. Who else would it rip away from her?

"What ends might those be?" Jade casually enquired.

"I don't know much about them, my brother didn't say much," Tear admitted, after taking a moment to calm down. "This is one of the places he's been using to research."

"Research what?" Natalia inquired.

"What else?" Tear replied bitterly.

"And he's made some astounding progress," Jade commented from the terminal he had already appropriated and begun scanning through. "What's this? My my, Commandant, you've quite outdone yourself."

"What is it?" Asch inquired, still not leaving Luke's side. His sibling hadn't said a word since Tear had begun to speak and it didn't take a genius to tell he was hurt by it. Hurt, and suddenly very afraid. Though saying Luke was terrified was a friendly way of putting it. But it wasn't like Tear was doing this on purpose, though every word from her mouth made it that much harder on Luke. She didn't know; a fact that was starting to look like the only chance her and Luke had of ever maintaining their relationship.

"Van's research data shows an exceptionally large potential area. Quite frankly, it's the largest I've ever seen."

"You mean like the size of a house?" Anise inquired.

"Hardly," Jade replied. "Something like that was possible even back when fomicry was first developed…" Jade paused a moment. "Sorry, Tear."

"My brother's up to something and it involves fomicry. It's okay, it's not like we can really avoid it. I want to help you out; this is my responsibility as well." Tear walked over to the Colonel and glanced at the screen he was reading. It all looked like meaningless nonsense to her. Numbers here, other symbols and equations there… and yet this is what had taken everything from her… Tear took a deep breath and settled her renewed anger. It wouldn't serve any further purpose right now. They had to stop her brother, before he used fomicry to ruin even more lives.

"Well the research data shows a potential size of over 30 million square kilometers. That's almost a tenth the size of Auldrant," Jade pointed out.

"That's huge!" Anise exclaimed. "Even if you could do that, where would you put it?"

"Do you suppose he's trying to drop the Outer Lands to make room for this replica he intends to
create?" Ion pondered.

"Drop the Outer Lands?" Tear exclaimed.

"It's a long story, we'll explain later," Anise provided.

"I see…" Jade continued to scroll down the list of information. "Well this also confirms what Dorian General Grants told you. There's the replica data here for all the citizens of Hod."

"How much suffering went into that information?" Tear asked bitterly.

"A great deal I'm sure," Jade replied, turning the monitor off. "In any case, there isn't much more we can discover here. We should make our way out."

"Yeah," Asch agreed, giving the unresponsive Luke a nudge. Luke shook his head, as if trying to shake off the daze that settled over him.

"Asch is right," Like pitched in.

'Are you okay?' Asch inquired.

'You're not going to make me…' Luke trailed off, the fear associated with the thought of telling Tear he was a replica spilled over their connection and easily finished his sentence for him.

'No,' Asch replied.

'Hey Asch, about earlier…'

'Don't worry about it,' Asch smiled, a gesture Luke returned with a huge sigh of relief. But behind that smile, a grave problem rested on Asch's mind. There was no way it was going to come out that Luke was a replica now. Not after everything Tear had just said. But without that, they wouldn't be able to address the issue of the faulty Score, which meant they would have to do something about it on their own…

So they started their game of secrets once again.
Cotton white clouds gently drifted across the azure sky when Noelle set the Albiore down in the empty field. The young blonde pilot suppressed a yawn as she stretched her arms. It felt good after such a long journey to be able to relax a bit. She had to admit, the training she and her brother had undergone had taught them many things, but the endurance to deal with longer journeys wasn't really one of them. It only took a few hours for her arms to start getting cramped up and blood circulation to her extremities to taper off. Since the autopilot feature was nowhere near ready to use, it left the otherwise perky pilot to deal with it for the next eight hours.

But Noelle wouldn't complain about it. All things considered, it was a lot less than her passengers had to deal with. They had probably gotten even less rest than she had, especially considering how cramped those cabins were. The six small rooms were hardly suited to sleep nine people. The group had insisted Noelle have her own cabin even though she had clearly expressed that she was fine sharing a room with one of the other girls. Another room was given to Guy, who seemed to be sick or something. Come to think of it, Noelle hadn't seen him around at all since they had departed from Ortion Cavern, and even then he was unconscious.

She couldn't help but wonder if Guy would be alright. He seemed to be quite a nice fellow, and had kept her company in the cockpit, asking all sorts of questions about the Albiore. She had missed his presence for the duration of the trip. Every now and then Luke… or was it Asch? She couldn't get over their resemblance; even the twins she knew didn't look that much alike. But one of them would come sit and keep her company for a time, which was awfully kind of him, especially since she knew they had more important things to discuss.

Noelle let out a sigh and stifled another yawn. She was looking forward to the opportunity for a nap while the others were in the city. While they set down the Albiore each night so she could sleep, Noelle knew the importance of their journey, so she had done her best to be back in the sky as early as possible.

The coastline here really was beautiful, and the water was so blue with the clear sky overhead. It made the open fields seems that much more green and full of life. Noelle chuckled, not unlike the group with whom she had found herself travelling.

"There you go," Noelle spoke up as she heard everyone behind her stir restlessly, "we're about an hour's walk from Grand Chokmah, just like you asked."

"Thank you," Jade replied. "The last thing we want is for the military to mistake us for an enemy ship. We should be back by tonight, or tomorrow at the latest."

"Okay, I'll be right here. If anything happens, I'll make sure to return here as soon as I can."

"Good."

"Say Noelle?" Luke spoke up, as he supported Guy over one of his shoulders.

"What is it?"

"Not that I mind your company or anything… but weren't you only taking us to Daath?"

"Oh that's right," Natalia realized. "Here we're dragging you halfway across the world with us."

"Don't worry about it, I don't mind," Noelle replied. "Besides, the other Albiore isn't fixed yet, so
I'll take you guys wherever you need to go in the meantime."

"Really?" Anise inquired. "How do you know that?"

"The two Albiores have a set of transmitters so that we can contact each other. I can't get through on the transmitter, so the repairs must not be done yet," Noelle explained.

"Sorry about dragging you into all this," Luke stated apologetically.

"Seriously, don't worry so much," Noelle chuckled. "I owed Ginji a favour anyway. Besides, I wouldn't be a pilot if I didn't love to fly. Though if you don't mind my asking, why Grand Chokmah? Are you taking him to see a doctor?" the young pilot inquired indicating Guy who was still unconscious.

Natalia grumbled, clearly displeased at being in the world's other capital, but didn't say anything. Luke let out an exasperated sigh.

"Is he going to be okay?" Luke quietly inquired, his soft voice almost lost to the sound of water as it dripped from the rock ceiling. He almost jumped when he felt a hand come to rest on his shoulder.

"I don't know very much about curse slots, so I don't know." Tear's voice came from beside him. Luke looked at her worriedly, but his nerves calmed a bit when Tear gave him a gentle smile. As long as she doesn't know...

"He should be fine as long as Sync isn't around." Ion spoke up also coming to take a look at the unconscious blonde. "He's probably just worn out from fighting it."

"So he's a threat to us so long as Sync is around?" Asch inquired.

"Unfortunately, yes," Ion confirmed. "That is, unless the curse slot is removed."

"Is that possible?" Luke's eyes lit up for the first time since they had come across Tear.

"Yes it is," Ion smiled, "however, it requires the use of a rather strong Daathic Fonic arte-

"Nuh uh. No way Ion!" Anise protested. "You're still recovering from reading the Score! You keep this up and you're going to get seriously sick!"

"But what will happen if Sync shows up again?" Tear pointed out.

"The chance of running into our God-General friend depends entirely on where we're going next," Jade pointed out.

"The Colonel's right, where are we heading next?" Anise inquired.

"We have to put a stop to this war before things get out of hand!" Natalia spoke up.

"So Baticul or Grand Chokmah," Jade courteously provided.

'Do you suppose Emperor Peony would know if there have been any signs of St. Binah falling?' Luke prodded his sibling.

'You know what, he just might,' Asch replied, the gears in his head turning fast at this new idea. Of
course! Any problems in the city would have been reported to the capital. It was perfect, they could kill two birds with one stone. But that would involve finding an excuse to hit Grand Chokmah over Baticul. Natalia wasn't going to like this; then again, she wasn't very happy with him to begin with. Oh well. 'Gotta say, I'm impressed.'


'You remembered Peony was the Emperor of Malkuth,' Asch replied with a smirk.

'Shut up!' Luke protested before opening his mouth and speaking to the group. "I think we should go to Grand Chokmah."

"What?!!" Natalia almost shrieked, her high pitched voice sending several of the cavern's small inhabitants scurrying for cover. "Why should we go to Grand Chokmah? We have far more influence and capacity to stop the war from Baticul!"

"But Asch already sent a message to Baticul," Luke protested. Asch was impressed with how serious and calm Luke was while handling the fiery princess. "No word whatsoever has gone to Grand Chokmah." Luke looked over at Jade who nodded in confirmation. "So I think it's a much more logical place to start."

Natalia fumed. Any traces of the tenuous reconciliation that may have occurred between her and Luke clearly vanished with his latest protest.

"I agree with Luke," Asch pitched in, backing his sibling up. With any luck Jade would figure out what they were planning and would help out too.

"What about Guy?" Ion asked, as Tear was checking the blonde for injuries. It was a good thing he was unconscious, and Luke was almost expecting the woman's touch to pierce right through his slumber and send him screaming halfway across Ortion Cavern. But the blonde remained motionless.

"Colonel, how far is Grand Chokmah?" Anise asked.

"On the Albiore, probably about 3 days, maybe more, maybe less."

"Good," Anise nodded as if confirming something for herself. "That should give Ion plenty of time to rest up. What do you think Ion? Could you wait to remove the curse slot until we get to Grand Chokmah?"

"I can, I don't foresee any risks between now and then."

"All right!" Anise replied perkily "Then let's get going!"

"Why I never..." Natalia mumbled in her fury, but followed everyone just the same.

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"Well you guys get going," Noelle said ushering the group out the door. "Take care! Make sure you're all in one piece when you come back this time okay?" She called after them with a wave, watching them walk towards the city until they were out of sight.

Noelle stretched and let out the yawn she had been suppressing all morning. A nap would feel nice,
and then she'd be ready to go whenever they got back. She may not have known them long, but this particular group had already demonstrated an alarming tendency to need to leave places in a hurry. Not that she was surprised, they were caught up in something bigger then all of them. All she could do to help out was be ready for when they needed her.

Natalia proceeded down the road, trailing behind the redheads, making absolutely no attempts to hide her displeasure at their destination. She was so mad! They knew she was desperate to get back to Baticul, and that she'd been overly worried for quite some time now. Why were they so bent on avoiding it? If she didn't know better, she'd swear they were doing it to spite her! What would happen if war broke out? Why was Asch so desperately avoiding his responsibilities? But she knew the answer to that question. After all, Grand Chokmah hadn't been his idea, now had it?

Growing bored of sending daggers through the back of Luke's head, Natalia's gaze shifted to the blonde that said redhead and his original were carrying. She certainly hoped that Guy would be alright. Maybe once he woke up she could enlist him to help her knock some sense back into those two.

"Don't worry," a voice caught the princess off guard. "I'm sure he'll be fine."

"My goodness, Tear" Natalia replied bringing her hand to her chest, "I didn't see you there, you startled me."

"I'm sorry," the melodist apologized. "You just looked worried so I thought I'd see how you were doing."

"I'm fine, thank you for your concern. I should be the asking you that. How have you been holding up?"

"Oh, you mean what happened back in the cavern?" Tear asked hesitantly.

"Yes, I must say I've never seen you quite so passionate about anything before. It's a whole new side to you," the princess teased.

"I've calmed down since then," Tear answered with a bit of a chuckle, but it didn't hide the pale pinkish hue that flushed her cheeks. None the less Natalia's innocent jab lightened her mood. "But it still doesn't change my feelings on the subject."

"I think I can sort of understand; I would hate anything that took my family away from me," Natalia agreed. Though she couldn't help but quietly wonder what this new development would mean for her and Luke. After all, her cousin seemed to be rather fond of Tear, and she certainly didn't seem to dislike the attention Luke had been giving her. Not that she really cared much for her future brother-in-law at the moment, but it would be a shame to see Tear so drastically let down.

"So how have you been doing?" Tear inquired. They really hadn't had much of a chance to talk during the trip, at least not just the two of them like this.

"I'm fine, why do you ask?"

"You seems upset about something, and you and Asch haven't spoken at all, at least not while I've been around. Did something happen?"
Natalia smiled at her friend's perceptiveness. "Well I'm concerned about Guy of course," Natalia stated in an attempt to avoid the issue. "He's been out for over three days now."

"He's probably worn out from fighting off the curse slot," Tear explained, not buying Natalia's excuse for a second.

"Last time he was only out for a day."

"Maybe this time he had more of a reason to fight it."

"I suppose," Natalia trailed off.

"Natalia, what's really the matter? If you don't want to talk to me about it, that's fine. After all, we've only known each other for a short time, and have been separated for awhile now, but don't think you're fooling anyone with that excuse of yours."

"You're right," Natalia conceded. "It doesn't have anything to do with you; it's just difficult to talk about. I don't even want to believe it myself."

"Would talking about it help? If so, I'd be willing to listen," Tear offered.

"It's just that… well; you know everything that your brother's been up to, right?"

"Well, he didn't exactly tell me everything, but I do know some of what he's done and that he's planning."

"We just found out ourselves, about a day before we found you," Natalia explained. "That in itself wouldn't be all that bad… but Asch and Luke have known for quite some time now and…"

"And they never told you," Tear finished. Natalia nodded in confirmation. "Do you think maybe it was because they didn't want to get you caught up in everything?"

"That's what Asch said, but… how could he think I'd want to be anywhere but at his side?" Natalia asked. Tear didn't have an answer. "Luke I can understand, ever since he was little, we've never gotten along, but Asch, I would have thought… I would have thought at least he would tell me. He was comfortable telling Luke about it, what makes me so untrustworthy? Why doesn't he want my help?"

"Natalia…" Tear trailed off. She understood the problem now. Natalia was jealous of Luke… or perhaps jealous wasn't the right word. She was competing. Natalia felt like she was competing with Luke for Asch's attention and that was why she was so easily upset. Tear couldn't help but wonder for how many years this had gone on. It certainly explained why Natalia and Luke never seemed to be on very good terms.

"I don't think it's that," the melodist eventually replied. "Asch just didn't want to see you getting all caught up in this mess where you might end up getting hurt. I'm sure of it. He cares about you."

"If he cared about me, would he be having an affair?" Natalia mumbled.

"What are you talking about?" Tear asked incredulously. She couldn't possibly have said what she thought… Asch wasn't that kind of person.

"Lately…he's been getting all sorts of convenient information." Natalia explained. "He found out that you'd been captured, where you were being held, all kinds of things. He disappears for hours at a time, sometimes late into the night."
"But why would that make you suspect he's having an affair?"

"Whenever we ask, he talks about a 'she'. This mysterious woman who's helping him for no apparent reason, and who keeps sending messages saying she wants to meet with him. Tell me then, what am I supposed to believe?" Natalia was getting close to hysteric by this point. Thankfully they had fallen far enough behind that no one took notice.

"Natalia," Tear placed a hand comfortingly on the girl's shoulders. "I'm sure you're making this out to be much more than it really is. Just because he has an ally that's female, doesn't mean he's cheating on you. Try having a bit more faith in him. Don't you trust him?"

"I do…but-"

"Then why don't you try talking to him? You'll see, you're getting all worked up for nothing."

Silence fell over the girls and they continued to walk, silently enjoying their re-forged friendship through the mutual sharing of their personal dilemmas. At the pace they were travelling, it wasn't long before they could see Grand Chokmah in the distance.

"Now," Tear spoke up, handing Natalia a handkerchief. "Dry those tears, you won't be making a very good impression on Peony looking like that."

Natalia smiled. "Thank you, Tear."

Tear smiled. "What are friends for?"

The floating imperial city of Grand Chokmah was aptly named. There wasn't a single place in the entire city where the sound of running water couldn't be heard. The marble buildings and cobblestone streets almost glowed as the sun shone down over the capitals' residents. The light danced off the water giving the city a magical air that was unparalleled in all of Auldrant.

These days, however, things weren't as calm and peaceful as the city itself seemed to suggest. Soldiers quickly hurried to and fro, and were thankfully far too busy to pay any sort of attention to the newest arrivals, even with one of them clearly unconscious.

"It looks like we've arrived in time," Jade commented taking a quick look around, glad no one was questioning his return from the land of the dead.

"But only just," Asch tossed in.

"I'd say you're likely right in that regard," Jade commented once another squad of soldiers hurried by them and made their way out of town. "I'd better go see about getting an audience with his Majesty."

"Where do you want us?" Asch inquired.

"Well it would probably be best if I go alone at first. I am assumed dead after all, it will be difficult enough to convince them of my identity without a triage of Kimlascan nobility accompanying me."

"Then you go," Asch replied, "we'll deal with Guy and meet you…"

"There's a park in a central area on your way to the castle," Jade provided. "Meet me there in an hour; hopefully it won't take much longer than that. Oh, and do watch out for soldiers. Please don't
do anything rash."

"Who do you think you're talking to?" Asch protested.

"Oh I know," Jade shot back. "That's why I'm concerned." But before Asch could come up with a retort, Jade had slipped away.

"So what are we going to do about Guy?" Luke inquired, sitting the blonde up against a nearby railing and stretching his arms.

"Well we'll need somewhere he and Ion can rest afterward," Tear pointed out, "so the inn is probably the best place to go."

"Anise could you help me bring him to the inn?" Ion requested, motioning to place one of Guy's arms over his shoulder. He wobbled on his feet a bit before Tear quickly relieved him of his burden.

"Sure thing, Ion," the Fon Master Guardian replied taking the other arm. It was a really good thing Guy was unconscious.

"I'll help too!" Mieu bounced over and perched on Guy's head. He really wasn't doing anything useful, in fact he was only adding weight to the blonde, but no one had the heart to tell him otherwise.

"What about us?" Luke asked. "I can help."

"So can I," Asch agreed. "We have to wait for the old man anyways."

"No, it would be best if the two of you aren't there," Ion replied solemnly.


"Because you two are the ones he attacked."

"What difference does that make?" Asch inquired.

"I suppose you would have found out eventually…" Ion let out a sigh. "A curse slot can't actually control someone."

"What do you mean?" Asch's expression grew dark.

"A curse slot stirs up old memories and paralyzes rational thought. It couldn't make Guy try to kill you if he didn't already have a reason to want to do so."

Kill him? Asch froze to the spot, feeling as if someone had dropped the whole of Auldrant into the pit of his stomach. Guy wanted to… to kill him? But how? Why? Asch had always known that Guy disliked him as a kid… but he had actually wanted to kill him? He thought they had settled their differences… that they had both put that pointless hatred behind them. But Guy's actions in Ortion Cavern spoke more of the truth than his words did. Even after everything… Guy still wanted him dead. But Luke…

Luke didn't look like he was faring much better at the news. Luke shouldn't have to be concerned, he was the one Guy hated so avidly. His little brother meant almost everything to Guy, there's no way he could possibly want to kill Luke. Sure maybe the two of them hadn't completely gotten over their issues, but Guy would never hurt Luke… Asch could still trust him that far.
'Don't worry, I'm the one he was after,' Asch said in attempts to ease Luke's concern. 'He doesn't want to kill you.'

'Then why did he come after me at the port in Baticul?' Luke replied meekly, making more of a statement than a question. He was devastated.

Asch's heart sank. Any thread of hope, of dying faith in the blonde that Asch had been trying to cling to snapped in that moment.

"I'm sure he must have some sort of reason," Tear replied noticing the anger and despair that so swiftly consumed the twins. She would have gone to their side if she wasn't holding onto the object of their sudden foul mood.

"I can take him from here," Ion offered.

"That's alright Fon Master," Tear replied shooting one last glance at the siblings who hadn't budged an inch. "I'll help you carry him in, then I'll leave you be. We'll all meet where Jade said in an hour, okay?"

"Alright," Natalia replied.

The response Tear was looking for from Luke and Asch never came.

Luke leaned against the edge of the bridge, watching the water pass by below him. His reflection was his only company, but the solitude was nice. The constant chatter and sound of soldiers running from one place to the next seemed to be drowned out by the moving water. Something he loved about this place, it was so easy to let your thoughts get swept away, just like the water that ran through the city.

Luke took a moment to look around; to his left was the park Jade had mentioned. In it, several people were walking around, enjoying the beautiful weather, chatting of blooming flowers and impending war. To his right on the other side of the bridge sat a string of shops, where eager merchants peddled their goods. Beyond them stood the inn where Guy… Luke returned his gaze to the water. His reflection comforted him, it always had. Maybe because it reminded him of his brother, and the days when he had been little and often mistaken his reflection for his sibling. It was a story his mother never got tired of telling.

"So where's Asch?" Tear appeared behind Luke and leaned on the railing beside him.

"Natalia said she needed to talk to him," Luke replied. Tear couldn't resist a smile. "What?"

"Nothing," Tear gently replied and let out a soft sigh. "I was actually hoping I'd find you alone."

"Were you," Luke replied in a matter of fact tone. He knew he should make an effort for Tear, but everything seemed so pointless. But, in spite of his apathy and generalized depression, Luke felt a sense of nervousness arise at the thought of talking with Tear alone. Was it because he was afraid she might find out the truth? That he was a replica… a subject she deemed worthy of her hatred. No, as long as she didn't know…

"Try not to feel so down about Guy," Tear painfully hit the nail on the head. "I'm sure he has his reasons."
"Everyone keeps saying that, but what possible reasons could there be?" Luke's gaze remained fixed on the water.

"Guy's only human. Maybe you made him mad once, mad enough he wanted to kill you," Tear suggested. "It doesn't mean that he would, or that he actually wants to see you hurt."

Silence fell over them both.

"I have something really important I needed to talk to you about," Tear stated, this time succeeding in drawing the young noble's attention.

"What is it?" Luke asked, seeming more concerned. Taking out his problems on Tear wasn't going to help any. Besides, he really was glad to have her back. He wanted to be happy for her; he wanted to smile for her, if only so she would smile back. He owed her that much.

"It's about Akzeriuth," Tear replied solemnly. Luke nodded for her to continue.

"I thought about it for a long time before I came back to the Outer Lands. I thought about what happened, about everything you said to me, and about why you might have done such a thing…"

Wait. The gears in Luke's head began to turn at Tear's last line. Didn't she know about Akzeriuth? Like, what had really happened in Akzeriuth? It hadn't been brought up, but he thought for sure she must know. But the way she was talking… Luke opened his mouth to make a statement, but before he could utter a sound, Tear continued.

"But I had no idea that Akzeriuth's fall was in the Score; that your own family had sent you to die… I didn't know any of it. And because of that, I yelled at you, I abandoned you for having done something that was inevitable."

"Tear," Luke began when the melodist paused.

"But I still couldn't look past the fact that you killed all those people," she continued. Either she hadn't heard Luke, or she had chosen to ignore him. "What you did to those people was horrible, it was evil, and it was wrong. It was so much easier to hate you at the time, and I did. But then after everything you told me in Yulia City, I didn't know what to think anymore. Those weren't the tears of a murderer."

"Tear," Luke tried again. He had to tell her the truth. "There's something I have to tell-"

"Please," Tear cut the redhead off. "Let me finish this." She paused and Luke nodded for her to continue. "That was when I realized that I had spent so much time judging and scolding you that I had never really gotten to know you. So I decided I had to talk to you, I wanted to see for myself the kind of person you are. Then I would decide what I believe."

"So what did you end up deciding?" Luke asked.

"I haven't yet. I still want to see the real you," Tear replied. "I've decided to put Akzeriuth, put the past behind me for now. I want to learn more about you, and I want to see where you will go and what you will do. We both want to stop my brother, so let's go together."

Luke smiled, but couldn't find the words to reply.

"So what was it you wanted to tell me?" Tear inquired with a gentle smile to match the one on Luke's face.

Let's go together.

"Watch yourself!" A soldier called out but didn't wait for either of the teens to get out of his way. The man crashed into Tear, staggering a moment before hurrying along without offering a single word of apology.

Luke instinctively caught the melodist as she fell forward. Their eyes met and both of them felt their cheeks flush. Tear scrambled to get back her feet again. A soft clinging noise drew both their attention.

"Oh, Luke!" Tear pointed towards a small golden object that was rolling off to the right side of the bridge. Luke chased after it and caught it just as the small trinket had gotten to the other side. The young noble let out a sigh of relief as he replaced his treasured locket back in his pocket.

"You're going to lose it for good one of these days," Tear commented as she joined Luke on the other side of the bridge. "How come you don't put it around your neck? It wouldn't get lost that way."

"No way!"

"Why not?"

"It's jewellery. I'm not wearing any jewellery!" Luke protested. The way he was talking, it sounded like he'd sooner listen to Mieu talk for five hours straight than wear anything that could in any way be considered girly.

"Well then why bother carrying it around if you aren't going to wear it?"

"Because it's important," Luke mumbled.

"Oh, give it here," Tear said snatching the locket by the chain that was still hanging out of Luke's pocket.


"There," Tear stated with a grin at Luke who was fumbling with the clasp. "It looks good on you."

"How do you work this stupid thing?" Luke continued to fight with the small golden latch, but to no avail. He hadn't the first clue how to get the darn thing open. "Could you give me a little help here?" Luke asked Tear who was almost in stitches.

"You don't know how to open it?" Tear teased.

"How would I know? I've never worn anything like this before!"

"Then I guess you're stuck wearing it," Tear snickered. Luke grumbled in defeat as he placed the locket under his shirt.

After a moment, Tear noticed Luke's attention suddenly seemed to be drawn to the shops behind her. "Luke, what's the matter?" Instead of answering, Luke brushed past her and jogged over to a nearby store window.
"Hey Tear," Luke looked up with a grin. "Come take a look at this!" Tear slowly walked over, what could possibly have caught his attention from all the way over here?

But as soon as Tear walked over, she saw exactly what it was. Because sitting the shop's window, its sparkling blue sapphire gleaming for the world to see, was her mother's pendant. Tear couldn't believe her eyes; she never thought she'd ever see it again.

"Is that yours?" Luke asked, not that he really needed an answer with the way Tear's face was pressed against the window.

"Yes it is. That's my mother's pendant," Tear confirmed. "But I gave it to that coachman, how did it end up here?"

"He probably sold it. He was heading to the capital," Luke pointed out as he made his way towards the door of the small shop.

"Where are you going?" Tear inquired.

"I promised you, didn't I? That I would get it back for you someday." Luke responded with a smile before slipping in the shop.

"Luke, wait!" Tear called after the redhead but if he heard her, he had chosen to ignore her call. Did he know what he was doing? The pendant was very valuable, and Tear certainly didn't doubt the shop keeper planned to take full advantage of it. There was no way they could afford it!

"What are you thinking?" Tear demanded as soon as Luke came back out of the shop. "There's no way."

"Here," Luke cut her off handing Tear her precious memento. Tear stared at it, once again finding herself at a complete loss for words.

"Luke… why did you… how did you?"

"I have some of my own money too," Luke stated simply, "other than our travel funds. Since I wasn't swept away from Baticul last time, I made sure to bring my savings along," he teased. "Mother had given me some before I left for Akzeriuth too, so don't worry about it. It's not really like I needed it for anything else."

"Thank you," Tear managed as she held it closer. She would never let go if it again.

"I promised didn't I? Besides, it was my fault you had to give it up, it's the least I could do."

"Having fun you two?" Jade's voice caught both Luke and Tear off guard. Tear let out a frustrated sigh; she had forgotten the Colonel could be like that.

"Ah, Asch, Natalia," the Colonel greeted the newest arrivals, "your timing is rather convenient, I was just about to go look for you.

"Welcome back," Luke greeted his sibling. The sombre mood that had hung over Asch earlier seemed to have lifted quite a bit. "So what did you two need to talk about?" Natalia shot him a dirty look. It was the same look she always gave him when he was being nosy. Somehow it was comforting. Natalia was happily attached to Asch's arm, and she hated his guts again. Everything was back to normal.

"Were you looking for us old man?" Asch inquired.

"Not especially," Jade shrugged. "But your presence would be useful in an audience with his Majesty." Asch just rolled his eyes.

"So we're just waiting for Anise, Ion and Guy?" Tear inquired, biting her tongue at the last name. She hadn't been thinking again. Both twins lost a shade of the cheer they seemed to have found over the past hour.

"Well there are still a few minutes before our hour is up," Natalia pointed out. "Why don't we wait over there?" The princess pointed to several benches that sat in the shade of several large oaks who made their home in the park.

"May I join you?" Luke inquired hesitantly, unsure if he would be intruding.

"I don't see a problem," Natalia replied. "We're just waiting after all."

"Thanks," Luke smiled, though Natalia simply looked away. They still had a ways to go, but it was a start.

"Tear," Jade stopped the melodist as she made a move to join the other three. "If I may have a word?"

"What is it Colonel?"

"Oh nothing of importance, I was just curious about your opinions on fomicry that you expressed back in Ortion Cavern."

"What about them?" Tear's face darkened a bit.

"Don't you think such a blind hatred is a bit unfair?" Jade inquired curiously.

"Unfair? Is it really all that unfair? Fomicry destroys lives, it ruins families!" Tear began to get worked up. "If you think it's unfair, find me one person fomicry has ever made happy!"

Jade pondered it for a moment watching the three young nobles happily chatting on the park bench. He turned back to the young Oracle Knight.

"Do you love Luke?"

At the Colonel's sudden question, Tear felt her cheeks flush and she could only imagine how many shades of red she had just turned. "S-Stop trying to embarrass me and change the subject!" Tear protested. "Luke has nothing to do with fomicry, nor does the presence or lack of a relationship between us! You just don't have an answer do you?"

"No," Jade replied, the glimmer never fading from his eyes. "I'm afraid I don't."

"Hi guys!" Anise called as she ran towards them. "Sorry I'm late!"

"It's no big deal," Asch replied. He, his brother and his fiancée rejoined the group upon noticing Anise's arrival. "Where's Ion?"

"He was exhausted from helping Guy," the Fon Master Guardian replied. "The two of them are
sleeping at the inn. They said we can go ahead without them. Unless you need him as a mediator, Ion said it was okay to wake him up if we needed his help. I'd like to let him sleep if we can."

"I think it should be fine," Jade replied. "His Majesty has already heard our circumstances and has agreed to speak with us. Ion's intervention shouldn't be necessary at this point."

"Nice to finally hear some good news," Asch remarked.

"Yes, well if you want it to remain good, you'd better not be late. The hearing was scheduled to begin two minutes ago."

"Damn you old man, we're already late!" Asch shot back as he and everyone else hurried off towards the castle.

"My, my, it was just a joke…"

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Much like the glorious city in which it dwelled, the palace was overflowing with the sound of water. It was smaller than the castle in Baticul, but seemed much less frivolous, and just as grand. Jade led them up a short staircase and through two large doors that could only lead to one place.

Luke could tell from the moment they stepped into the throne room that Asch and Peony would probably never get along. In fact, he could tell that it was taking everything Asch had not to knock some sense into the man. He had his responsibility to Kimlasca to consider, after all. But honestly what was the emperor, stupid? The way he was checking out Natalia, he might as well have tacked a death wish on his forehead.

Luke watched the emperor's gaze shift from Natalia to Tear. Oh hell no. Luke stepped to the side and placed himself between Peony's wandering eyes and the melodist. Noticing what he had done, Peony laughed outright.

"Welcome guests!" Peony announced heartily as he welcomed them. "I certainly hope my Jade here hasn't been too much trouble to you."

"Not at all, your Majesty." Asch choked out, still suspiciously eyeing the man whose gaze still hadn't left Natalia's general direction.

'You draw in any more Seventh Fonons, and you're going to cause a hyperressonance over there,' Luke teased as Asch's temper was slowly luring in more and more of said particles.

'Shit up,' Asch shot back, but Luke could sense Asch trying to calm himself down. That or he was just shooing the fonons away.

"Nonsense," Peony replied, oblivious to the twin's private conversation. "I know what a pain he is, especially with that fon slot seal. I'll bet he's dragged you all over the place. Stubborn cod never wants to come home these days."

"Then it looks like we already agree on our opinions of the old man," Asch said with a grin. Next to Peony he caught a glimmer in Jade's eye. Let the bastard try it. He had it coming after making them rush all the way here when they weren't even late to begin with. Peony laughed.

"Well Jade? Are you going to do introductions or what?" Peony asked eliciting a defeated sigh from the Colonel.
"Yeah old man, what are you waiting for?" Asch joined in earning what the others could have sworn was an approving grin from Peony. Well what do you know, Luke chuckled. The two of them managed to find some common ground after all: the mutual harassment of Jade.

"Locrian Sergeant Tear Grants," Jade began on the left, "First Platoon, Oracle Knights Intelligence Division. Protecting her from your Majesty's wandering eyes is Luke fon Fabre, son and secondary heir to the Fabre household." Jade smirked as Peony suppressed a chuckle. "Next we have Anise Tatlin, Fon Master Guardian. Here we have Natalia Luzu Kimlasca Lanvaldear, daughter to his Majesty King Ingobert and princess of Kimlasca, and finally we have Asch fon Fabre, son of Duke Fabre and heir to the Kimlascan throne."

"Asch and Natalia," Peony began, "So you are alive and well. Did you escape from Kimlasca?"

"Escape?" Natalia inquired. "What do you mean by that, your Majesty?"

"We've been to Sheridan, but otherwise we haven't returned to our country since the disaster in Akzeriuth," Asch provided, equally confused by Peony's statement.

"Is that so?" Peony thought on it a moment. "That certainly changes things a bit."

"How so?" Natalia asked. Peony nodded to one of the men that stood around the throne. The man removed a letter from his jacket, opened it, and began to read.

"We hereby denounce Malkuth's destruction of Akzeriuth in order to bring about the deaths of Princess Natalia, and the heir to the throne, Asch fon Fabre. In the name of Lorelei and Yulia, we shall initiate immediate sanctions."

"It's a letter from Baticul. Now, for all intents and purposes, that's a declaration of war," Peony explained. "Then several days ago, a man from Daath was here… Mohs, I think his name was. He told us that you two had in fact survived Akzeriuth's fall, but were being hidden in Kimlasca as an excuse to justify war."

"Impossible!" Natalia protested. "Our country would never do such a thing!"

"Natalia," Asch placed his hand on her arm, trying to get her to calm down. "I agree with Natalia though," Asch returned his attention to Peony. "Kimlasca doesn't want war any more than you do. I'm afraid much of this has come because we have yet to return to Baticul. I don't know what Mohs told you, but if they are issuing a proclamation like the one they have, then it's because they truly believe that we were killed. It's a mistake on their part."

"Is it?" One of the other men at Peony's side demanded. "We believe that Kimlasca destroyed Akzeriuth as an excuse to start war!"

"No," Luke jumped in. "We know who's responsible for what happened to Akzeriuth, and we're trying to stop them from doing it again. It's why we haven't gone back to Baticul yet!"

"Ahh, that's right," Peony interjected. "Jade's told me you two are worried about St. Binah?"

"What?" Natalia, Tear and Anise spoke in unison their gaze shifting towards the two boys.

"That's right," Asch confirmed. "We have reason to believe St. Binah may be targeted next."

"By Kimlasca?!" the second advisor took the offensive.

"Calm down, Nordheim," Peony cut in. "If it was really going to be an act of aggression on
Kimlasca's part they wouldn't be telling us about it."

"It could be a ploy to make us lower our defences," the first man suggested.

"Now, now Sesemann," Peony argued. "Your dear apprentice Jade deems them trustworthy, and you've heard the story same as me. I don't think this is all smoke and mirrors. We'll keep a closer watch on St. Binah and let you know of anything unusual. So far all the news that's made it this far is of some minor earthquakes around that region."

"Do you think that could have come from operating the passage ring in that area?" Luke asked.

"It's a possibility," Jade replied.

"But we didn't feel an earthquake after the Meggiora Highlands," Anise pointed out.

"True, but we've also spent a lot of time in the air," Asch pointed out.

"Ugh, don't remind me," Anise grumbled.

"It wouldn't be hard for something like that to escape our notice," Jade agreed.

"But I thought the Score said that nothing would happen?" Anise protested. "The Score can't be wrong….can it?"

"The Score?" Peony inquired.

"Please, your Majesty," Asch replied, "we have reason to doubt the validity of the Score that was read. Besides, St. Binah wasn't specifically addressed in the Score when we checked. We would be going strictly on the basis that it wasn't mentioned. I'm not willing to risk that many lives on such a technicality, especially when we don't know the contents of the Seventh Fonstone."

"You have a way with words for someone your age," Peony commented. "I'll have General Frings and his men keep an eye on the city for you. I don't want to see any more of my people meet the fate those of Akzeriuth did either."

That's right, Luke suddenly realized. Akzeriuth was Malkuth territory; all those people that died were his citizens. Under his seemingly carefree demeanour, Peony bore a huge burden. All those lives were partially his responsibility, and it was his job to protect his people. Luke looked over at Asch and couldn't help but wonder if he bore the same burden for Kimlasca.


"In exchange, we'll head for Baticul and see what we can do about putting a stop to this war nonsense," Natalia offered. "Mohs must be dealt with."

"Yeah," Asch agreed. "It seems that he has his own reasons for wanting to see a war, there's a pretty good chance that he has Uncle's ear."

"Jade," Peony spoke up. "Go with them and help them out."

"As you wish your Majesty," Jade replied and rejoined the group.

"Let's go get Ion," Anise suggested. "If we're dealing with Mohs, then we're going to need his help."

"I agree," Natalia nodded. "We won't let him take advantage of father."
"Thank you for your help your Majesty," Asch reiterated with a quick bow. "We'll do our best to put a stop this war."

"Thanks guys, I really owe you one," Peony replied. "I don't want to see any war either; but remember, if it comes, I won't hesitate to protect my people." Natalia smiled and nodded. Maybe he wasn't such a terrible ruler after all.

"Then we had best be going," Jade suggested. "Baticul is no short trip, even in the Albiore."

"Good luck you guys!" Peony called after them. As the giant doors to the throne room slammed shut the group heard one last whisper.

"Your Majesty," Sesemann hissed, "it's impolite to address them as 'you guys'." No one could resist a chuckle as they found their way out of the palace. Apparently even emperors needed a scolding every once in awhile.

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Ion rolled over in bed and slowly opened his eyes. Guy was still sleeping silently in the bed next to his. He seemed to be doing much better. The weariness still seemed to weigh down on Ion and he felt horribly tired, but at least Guy wouldn't have to worry about the curse slot when he woke up. Ion sighed as his weakness tried to lure him back into slumber, but he simply lay there, trying his best to fight it off. The others would probably be back soon, and if he let Anise see how worn out he was, he would never hear the end of it.

She was always so worried, so overbearing about ensuring his wellbeing. It was probably a good thing; otherwise he would have likely gone past his limits a long time ago without even noticing. He did have a bad habit of not paying attention to his body's needs, namely for rest, so it really was a good thing that at least one person was looking out for his own best interest. He certainly never seemed to. But it wasn't like her constant mothering really bothered him. He kind of…liked it. It was nice to have someone who cared.

Ion had many people who cared now, so many friends, and it made him happy. He may be the Fon Master, but if anything, that had only further isolated him. He'd never really had anyone other than Anise. Now he had everyone, Asch, Luke, Tear, Jade, Natalia, Guy, and he still had Anise of course. He would do anything for them.

Ion rolled over again, though his body begged him to go back to sleep, he had to get up. There would be time to sleep on the Albiore, he would be needed soon. Ion blinked a couple times, the shadow that loomed over him finally piercing through his sleep fogged mind. Who?

But before Ion could make heads or tails of the figure standing next to his bed, darkness overcame him, and in spite of his resolve, he was forcefully returned to a world of slumber.

"A green-haired boy and a blonde, you say?" the Inn keeper asked.

"That's right," Anise replied, "I was here with them earlier. They're our friends; we have to leave earlier than we had planned so we came to pick them up. But we left the key with them, and they're probably both asleep. We just need to borrow the spare key."

"Are you guys friends with that lady too?"

"Lady? What lady?" Asch inquired, an edge of panic in his voice.
"The violet-haired one, with the eye patch," the inn keeper replied. "She went up to visit them not five minutes ago. I gave her the spare."

No sooner had the inn keeper finished; a huge thump seemed to shake the ceiling, followed by the sound of a slamming door.

"You idiot!" Anise yelled at the inn keeper as everyone rushed up the stairs. How could they have been so stupid?! They hadn't expected the idiot to let a God-General just walk right in!

Everyone rushed up the stairs as fast as they could, but by the time they got to the room, both its occupants were already gone.
"Shhht, quiet Guy. The Kimlascan Army will be here any minute now," a blonde girl took his hand. They were running. Why were they running? Where were mother and father?

"But Mary..."

"Not now Guy, you have to survive and carry on our house," Mary replied. They started running faster.

"They're here!" One of the maids cried. Mary looked around frantically. What was wrong? Why was Mary so scared? Where was everyone?

"Here," Mary led him to the fireplace. "Hide in here and don't make any noise."

"What about you Mary?"

"Don't worry about me, I'll be fine. Now you hide and don't make a sound!"

The door burst open.

"You have to survive."

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Guy cracked his eyes open and stared at the wall. It was that dream again. How many years had it been since he'd dreamt about Mary? Quite a few, but with things the way they'd been recently, he couldn't honestly say he was surprised. At least that damned curse slot was gone. He made a mental note to properly thank Ion later.

Guy shifted his head on the pillow, but a dull throb protested his movement. Why did his head hurt so bad? Guy brought his hand up and fingered the source, a lump behind his left ear. What in Auldrant... Bringing his arm back around in front of him, he felt his hand brush up against something... or someone. Were the others back already?

Wait, Guy suddenly snapped awake. Without moving, he glanced around as much as he could. This wasn't where he had fallen asleep. The walls were a different colour and the sun no longer streamed in the window even though it couldn't be later than noon. But if he wasn't in Grand Chokmah anymore... where was he?

"So you're finally awake," a vaguely familiar voice came from behind him. Though Guy couldn't quite put his finger on it, he did know one thing, it most definitely was not someone he wanted to find himself alone with. The blonde hesitantly rolled over. Not an inch from his face was a grinning violet-haired God-General.

Guy's heart jumped out of his chest and he found himself desperately clinging to the far bed post, as if that would stop the woman should she choose to advance. But she didn't, she simply sat on the other side of the bed in fits of laughter.

Eventually the God-General's laughter subsided, instead her single visible eyebrow was arched and she was giving him a rather pointed look. Guy's death grip slowly relaxed, now wasn't the time to be letting his fear get the better of him.
"Where's Ion?" Guy demanded. There was no way that she could have possibly taken on the entire group, which meant she must have grabbed him and Ion before everyone got back from wherever they had gone. Ion never did mention what they had been up to.

"In his room," the woman replied. "He's being forcefully held there, but he's in his room."

"Why did you take me prisoner too?"

The violet-haired woman sighed.

"Cantabile..." Guy began. "It's you isn't it?"

"Well, well Gailardia," Cantabile replied with a smile. "It looks like I'm not the only one that remembers our past."

The room showed little sign of struggle. The blankets were half-heartedly strewn across the bed, and a few papers had been knocked onto the floor. The vase on the nightstand had fallen over, but hadn't broken, and one of the pillows was sitting in the far corner of the room. Had Luke not known that the Fon Master and his best friend, the person he hoped was still his best friend, were supposed to be sleeping soundly in those two beds he would have thought that someone had simply woken up in a hurry.

"Damn, they're already gone," Anise grumbled when she walked back in the room. The Fon Master Guardian had flown up the stairs in attempt to catch the assailant in their escape. With only one staircase and them at the bottom of it, the culprit only had one way to go, and that was up. "Looks like Gloomietta was in on it too," she continued. "The two of them took off of a couple of those birds of hers."

"They could be going anywhere," Tear pointed out. "How are we going to find them?"


"How's it going to be easy?" Asch gave his little brother a pointed look.

"Because they left behind a witness," Luke replied holding up a ball of blue fur. The little cheagle had opted to stay with Guy and Ion at the inn while the rest of them had visited the palace. From the looks of things, the little guy had just been thrown aside when the God-Generals had attacked.

"Master?" The cheagle's voice came out faintly.


"Master!" Mieu jumped right out of Luke's grip and clung to the unexpected young noble. "I'm so glad to see you! I was so scared!"

"Easy, easy," Luke plucked the cheagle off his face and placed it on his head. "What happened here?"

"The God-Generals came for Ion," Mieu explained. "They took Guy too; I tried to stop them but... mieuuuuu." The cheagle's ears sank in disappointment. "They just threw me aside and said they had to hurry back to Daath before everyone else got back," Mieu finished.

"They said they were going to Daath?" Asch confirmed.
"Yes they did!" Mieu perked up realizing the information he had given had proven useful.

"Then I guess we're going to Daath," Luke stated disappointedly. "No offence or anything Anise, but I hate Daath. Nothing good ever happens in Daath."

"None taken," Anise replied. She agreed wholeheartedly.

"It bothers me," Asch stated.

"What does?" Tear inquired.

"Ion, I understand, but what use do the God-Generals have for Guy?"

"That's a good point. They purposefully kidnapped him as well, and taking a second person requires a significant amount of effort. It wasn't something done on a whim," Tear pointed out.

"Could they be planning some sort of trap?" Natalia suggested.

"But why bother with Guy?" Anise asked. "They know we'll come for Ion, it's not like they need bait."

"There is always the possibility that he's useful to them," Jade suggested.


"I was simply implying the possibility," Jade replied. "If that is the case what will you do? The God-Generals have clearly shown some sort of interest in him, and he has some kind of resentment against the two of you. What are you planning to do?"

"We'll rescue him," Asch provided shooting a glance at his sibling. "But after that… he's going to have a lot explaining to do."

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"So who did your parents end up choosing anyway?" The blonde took a sip of his drink before returning to haphazardly drowning the ice cubes with his straw.

"I don't know, some whiny brat from the Western District." Cantabile replied with a shrug.

"Oh, now that would have been a happy marriage." Guy rolled his eyes.

"Tell me about it, I would have strangled him by the time he was twenty." Both of them laughed.

"Cantabile…" Guy asked hesitantly after a moment. "What are you doing?"

"What kind of stupid question is that? What does it look like I'm doing?" She replied with a pointed look. "I'm sitting in a café having a dr-"

"You know what I mean." Guy cut her off, waving his arm to indicate their surroundings. They were seated in a little café that was nestled on a small corner in Daath. Just off the main road going in and out of the city, the little shop did well, and the two rather unusual customers went otherwise unnoticed; their conversation lost to anyone but each other amidst idle chatter of the crowd.

"And this is just bothering you now?" Cantabile teased. The two of them had been chatting away
for at least an hour if not two already, but still the God-General smiled. "I'm just catching up with
an old friend," she replied simply. The last of Guy's tension relaxed, maybe for once, things really
were all that they seemed to be.

"Hey, can I ask you something random?"

"Sure," Cantabile replied.

"Does Legretta have a thing for Van?"

"That would be putting it lightly," Cantabile teased. "The woman's borderline obsessed. I've never
seen anyone quite as devoted to someone as she is to Van. It's a real pity."

"What is?"

"At one point Van seemed to return the feelings but-"

"Not lately."

"Not lately," Cantabile confirmed.

"See, last time we were here in Daath, we had a rather… interesting encounter with Legretta," the
blonde explained.

"I'd bet."

"Oh?" Guy inquired. "You know about it?"

"Not really, but I can only imagine. Did she seem a bit off?"

"Off? She was totally off her rocker," Guy replied. "Any chance she walked in on you and Van
doing something questionable?"

"Guy," Cantabile sighed. "You of all people should know that that's the last thing on Van's mind
these days."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"I miss those days," Cantabile confessed. "When the three of us used to mess around at your place."

"Yeah," Guy smiled fondly. "We couldn't have been more than what? Five?"

"I was five and a half," Cantabile protested and the two of them burst out laughing. "You know,"
she began once they had both calmed down. "If things hadn't happened the way they did, he would
have happily served you until the end of his days."

"Yeah," Guy replied solemnly, "I know."

"I think it's because we were such good friends as kids," Cantabile continued. "Van's always felt
comfortable talking to me about stuff, you know? Especially lately, he's always so worried and
stressed out about everything; he's going to burn himself out. I know he has to do it, I know why he
has to do it, but I still hate seeing him like that. So I do all I can do, I listen when he wants to talk,
and I try and help him keep things in perspective. That's why Legretta keeps running into us
together and gets all worked up about it. But we're just talking. That's all."

"You still have feelings for him?"
"You remember that?" Cantabile asked incredulously.

"Yeah, I remember. You hid out in my room for three days when your parents told you you weren't allowed to marry him because he was from a lesser household."

"That was a long time ago," Cantabile chuckled. "A lot has happened since then, but I think once all is said and done, it was just a childish crush. We're good friends, but nothing more than that. Besides, he really did have a thing for Legretta," the violet-haired God-General winked.

"You sure haven't changed," Guy's comment made Cantabile smile.

"You have though," she commented and with a devilish smirk motioned to take Guy's hand. Without even realizing what he was doing Guy recoiled, scrambling to grab the table's edge when he nearly knocked his chair over backwards. The entire café seemed to fall silent as everyone turned to see what the source of sudden commotion was. Slowly, as everyone lost interest in the blonde, the murmur of the crowd returned.

"I'm so pathetic," Guy sighed as his head sank down onto the table.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Cantabile said with a soft smile. "It's not like you can help it."

"But still, it's so-"

"I'm sorry," Cantabile's solemn statement cut Guy off and caught him by surprise. "I'm sorry about what happened to your family."

"It's okay," Guy confessed. "To be honest, I don't really remember much about what happened. I've been remembering bits and pieces of it lately, but it's all still pretty blank."

"Can't say I'm all that surprised considering what happened," Cantabile commented. "Maybe it's for the best that way. There are days I wish I couldn't remember watching my mom die."

"Your whole family was killed too?"

"No," Cantabile explained. "Just my parents. Well, I assume my dad was killed, he had gone out when the military invaded. I never saw him after that. My mom was slaughtered right in front of me."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be, it's not your fault," Cantabile protested. "It's those Kimlascan bastards that are to blame! After my mom was killed the soldiers didn't have it in them to kill me or my little brother. Apparently leaving us to starve to death was more humane."

Guy watched his childhood friend, amazed at the hatred that burned so vehemently within her. It surprised him; five minutes ago she had been the happy, carefree, little girl from his childhood, now... she was a force to be feared. Then again, it hadn't been all that long ago that same flame had burned within him. A desire for revenge, a desire for justice against the ones that had wronged them, was that really so wrong? To want to hurt the ones who had stolen all those memories from them, who had destroyed their future? It was something he had once wanted, and maybe still did.

"So where's your little brother now?" Guy asked.

"He didn't survive. He drowned in the miasma after the land fell," Cantabile replied solemnly.
"How did you escape?"

"I'm not entirely sure. I remember clinging to some kind of statue or rock, but I was in and out of consciousness the entire time. I don't know how I ended up in Yulia City, but Van was there when I woke up. I think he must have been the one that found me. No one else bothered to search for survivors."

"Van did that?" Guy inquired incredulously.

"Yeah," Cantabile answered. "He'd go out for days at a time trying to find anyone who had survived. He'd come back and he'd be worn right out. After me, he never found anyone else, but he wouldn't stop trying. It wasn't until the land finally sank that we were able to convince him to stop. It destroyed him."

"Funny, Tear's never said a word about any of that," Guy commented.

"She was still a baby at the time. Once I was well enough to get out of bed, I helped take care of her while Van was gone. Teodoro didn't like what Van was doing. He believed that everyone who was still out there, who hadn't somehow managed to make it to safety on their own, was meant to die; it was probably the reason he never mounted any sort of search and rescue effort. The Score condemned them so they should be left to their fate."

"I don't think that's right."

"Neither does Van, and I agree with the both of you. I still remember how disgusted I was when I heard him say that. One single prophesy is supposed to make everyone I care about worthless? Then let that prophesy burn in hell for all I care."

"So how did you end up here?" Guy asked curiously

"Well I lived in Yulia City for awhile; Van had already joined the Oracle Knights by the time I moved to Daath. When I was old enough, I joined too. I owed Van my life, and I wanted to help him. I agreed with his ideals, and his vision of the world. Besides, I had faith that if I followed my goals long enough, I'd eventually get to meet you again."

"Cantabile, I really am sorry. All these years I thought you had died, if I had known…"

"It's okay; you were chasing your own goals, just like I was chasing mine."

"Yeah," Guy replied. "I'm glad we met again."

"Me too," Cantabile agreed. "I wish it could have been sooner though. It might have made it easier for you to get through all those years working for those murderers."

"You knew about that?"

"Yeah, Van explained to me what you had decided to do. I really admire you for that. To have that kind of willpower… to choke down orders from cold blooded killers all these years. Don't worry," Cantabile smiled comfortingly. "I'm sure the chance to kill those two little brats of his will come soon. Then you'll be free."

Guy let out a sigh and stared into his glass. To be free, huh? But the question still remained…

Free from what?
And was it even something from which he wanted to be released?

The Oracle Knight crippled under the young noble's blade, his armour crashing as the soldier fell to the ground. The noise echoed in the hallway, but Asch simply watched him fall. In all likelihood the noise would signal to his comrades. He didn't care. Stupid. He was so stupid! Stupid to believe Guy had saved his life because he cared, the only damn thing Guy cared about was that fact Van still needed him. Let the bastards come. He'd destroy every last one of them.

My, my, Jade watched as Luke swung around sending the second guard crashing lifelessly in to the far wall, sinking to the ground much like his companion. The guards outside the Fon Master's room certainly hadn't stood a chance against those two, but really, couldn't they find a quieter way of venting their frustration? They were both completely wound up and quite upset. Beyond reason even. Not that Jade could really blame them, not with what they had just overheard.

After all, they had barely entered Daath when they caught a glimpse of their missing comrade, and despite the fact that they knew the blonde had some motivation to see both redheads six feet under, Luke at the very least, had been relieved to see him. That was when they noticed the company he kept. Now being caught with a God-General could mean a lot of things, but the fact that he was unrestrained, chatting over a couple of drinks with her in a small café on the corner, really limited those options.

So they decided to eavesdrop, the boys' last ditch attempt to give him the benefit of the doubt. Then...well suffice it to say that blew up in their faces. Even Luke could no longer entertain any of the doubts he had so desperately clung to. Though watching the two boys as they had made their way through Daath, each guard they came across becoming another unfortunate victim to their growing frustration and sense of betrayal, Jade couldn't help but wonder who it was harder on; Luke who had trusted his servant as long as he'd known him, or Asch, who had finally let down his guard, perhaps for the first time in his life.

But regardless, the two of them were incredibly focused on the task at hand; more so than Jade had ever seen them. Neither had spoken a word since the group hurried them off from the little café and their former companion. They were still in shock, unable to process the full extent of the truth they had uncovered. Asch got angrier, Luke withdrew, but they both forced themselves onward, neither of them saying a word. They needed to rescue Ion, and they needed to stop the war. If Guy decided to get in their way... then they would just have to deal with that when it came.

All things considered it had been a much simpler task than Jade had previously expected. Aside from Natalia and Tear struggling to keep their respective charges in check and free from injury from time to time, the rest of them really didn't have to do much in the way of fighting. As reckless as the two boys may be, this was probably a good way for both the young nobles to express their feelings. Much better than leaving it bottled up inside where it threatened to explode at a more inconvenient instance. Even Luke, who Jade had feared might do just that, had joined in the fray and quickly gotten over his initial withdrawal. So while they were being more than excessive and rather loud, Jade would allow it. It was better than the alternative.

"This is Ion's room right, Anise?" Luke inquired.

"Definitely," The Fon Master Guardian replied.

"It's unlocked," Asch commented.
"Ion never locks his door," Anise explained.

"But they're holding him captive," Tear pointed out. "Why leave the door unlocked?"

"It does seem rather counter intuitive," Natalia commented as everyone walked in through the door into a small office. It was a rather barren room in spite of the decorated walls. At the center stood a lone desk and chair, all neat and tidy; a thin layer of dust indicating it hadn't been used in quite awhile.

"There is of course the alternative option," Jade pointed out.

"What's that?" Luke asked as he opened the door on the far side of the room.

"What did I tell you idiots about-" The young God-General's scolding was cut off when she noticed exactly who it was who entered the room.

"Gloomietta," Anise seethed.

"What are you doing here Anise?!" Arietta snapped back.

"That there's someone else in there with him," Jade finished with a disappointed sigh. He had so hoped to get in and out without encountering a God-General this time. Oh well, some things it seemed, were simply inevitable.

"Arietta," Ion began. "Please let me go with them."

"I'm sorry Ion, not this time," Arietta stood her ground before the Fon Master.

"Return Ion to us, Gloomietta. It's too small to get your monsters in here and you're out numbered. You know you don't stand a chance."

"I don't care! I'll never let Ion go with you!"

"Please Arietta," Ion pleaded. He didn't want to see her hurt anymore than he wanted the others to have to fight her.

"No," Arietta stated. "You're sick, you're worn out and you can barely stand, but none of these people even care! They drag you around everywhere making you do things for them and they don't even pay attention to your health! What kind of friends are those?! Anise doesn't even take care of you! I'll never let you go back with them."

"But Arietta," Ion argued. "We need to stop the war. Otherwise more people will get hurt."

"Then let them get hurt," the young God-General protested. "They're not worth your health or your life!"

"How can you say that, Gloomietta?!"

"No, how can you say otherwise, Anise?! You're supposed to be his guardian; you of all people should be looking out for him first!"

"I…" Anise found herself at a complete loss for words.

"Have you stopped your selfish ramblings for long enough to see what the Fon Master wants?" Asch shot.
"He raises a very good point," Jade began. "If you truly cared about the Fon Master like you claim to, then you would be quicker to consider what he wants. Shouldn't his happiness be your primary concern?" Tear stared at the Colonel, what was he going on about? True though it may be... hearing Jade lecture the young God-General, about love of all things, was just...weird. Weird, and not like him at all. Just what was going on?

"But I-" Arietta's retort was cut off when Asch's elbow landed in the God-General's stomach, knocking her unconscious.

"Colonel, you said all that stuff to distract her didn't you?" Tear realized.

"When did you two...?" Natalia looked back and fourth between Jade and her fiancée who was picking the unconscious girl up off the floor. When had they planned a strategy like that? Jade simply shrugged and pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose.

"Shall we be going?" The notorious Colonel suggested.

"Yes," Tear agreed. "Let's get out of here before any more reinforcements show up."

"Don't worry Ion," Luke provided. "She's just unconscious. She'll probably be awake pretty soon so we really need to get going."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Ion conceded.

"Man," Anise stretched as she exited the room followed by the others. "Why did we have to run into Gloomietta of all people? Dealing with her always ruins my day."

"True, but all things considered we were quite fortunate. Had we encountered her with her monsters, things wouldn't have gone so smoothly," Natalia commented. "Still, it would have been nice if we could have avoided the God-Generals altogether."

"Yeah well, let's face it, coming to Daath and hoping not to run into a God-General is kinda like whacking a hive of bees with a stick and hoping not to get stung." Anise's snide remark elicited a chuckle from the rest of the group. Jade simply watched the other laughing in the office as Asch did his best to make the young God-General look like she was sleeping on the bed behind him. With that stuffed animal she carried around it wasn't difficult. Disguising their attack on the girl would buy them some time, so long as people passing by assumed her to be sleeping. It was cute. Jade refrained from pointing out that the trail of Oracle Knight bodies they had left leading all the way up to the Fon Master's room made the entire effort futile.

"You didn't try to kill her this time," Jade pointed out once everyone else was out of earshot.

"You got a point old man?" Asch shot back.

"Not really," Jade shrugged.

"Come on you two!" Luke called back to the stragglers. "We need to get going!"

"Wait," Ion stopped in the middle of his office.

"Let's go," Asch ushered the young boy along as he walked by. His face had become unexpectedly dark and serious. "We don't have any time to waste. We need to get to Baticul as soon as we can."

"But what about Guy?" Ion innocently inquired.
A tense silence fell over the group, no one dared say a word.

"We need to get to Baticul," Asch repeated.

"For more than one reason."

"I'm not," Guy's answer was drowned out by the chattering crowd that surrounded him and his companion.

"Sorry Guy, I didn't catch that," the violet haired God-General sitting across from him replied apologetically.

"I'm not going to kill them. I won't have revenge if it means taking their lives."

Cantabile burst out laughing. The woman almost had tears in her eyes by the time she realized that Guy hadn't followed suit. Her laughter died down a bit. "You're not serious are you?" she managed between chuckles.

"I am."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like," Guy replied. "I may have wanted it a long time ago, and hell, if I got the chance to take a swing at that man, I sure as hell would take it. But I'm not going to hurt either of his sons; they haven't done a thing to deserve it. What's wrong with that?"

"What's wrong with that? I'll tell you what's wrong with that!" Cantabile had clearly become upset. Several of the people at nearby tables had vacated, claiming some empty seats further away from the impending feud. "That man killed your parents, murdered your sister, your friends! He slaughtered everyone one; women, children, people that were completely harmless and utterly defenceless! He slaughtered them all and laughed while he did it! What had they done to deserve it?! He deserves to have everything ripped away from him! He should wallow in a hundred times the pain he delivered to us!"

"I won't stoop to his level, Mary wouldn't have wanted that," Guy replied.

"Mary wanted? Mary can't want anything anymore! She's dead! And her only little brother won't even avenge her!"

"Don't talk about my sister that way!"

"What do you care? You abandoned her! You abandoned them all the second you abandoned your desire for revenge! What happened to you Gailardia? You used to be such a strong person. I looked up to you. Now… you're just a dishonour to their memory."

"I won't kill them," Guy repeated. "I won't have that innocent blood on my hands."

"Like father, like son. They aren't innocent, the same tainted blood flows in their veins. You used to be able to see that," Cantabile replied solemnly. Guy returned her cold stare, but offered no retort.

"Go on, get out of here," Cantabile stood up, braking Guy's gaze.
Guy lost track of how many hours he had wandered Daath; long enough for the sun to be setting over the horizon and most of the shops to be closing up for the day. He hadn't managed to overhear anything useful, or anything that might hint at where Luke and the others would be heading. Nothing about war, nothing about St. Binah, nothing useful in any way at all; Guy let out a frustrated sigh. He racked his brain, trying to remember anything the others had said that might give him a clue. Cantabile had let him go, but she'd be damned before she gave him a ride back to wherever she had picked him and Ion up.

Ion. There was an idea. He should try and find Ion; the others would obviously try and track the missing Fon Master down. Then again, getting to see him, alone, was probably not feasible. Guy started towards the cathedral, it was worth a shot. Worse case scenario he'd be told no.

The swoosh of a cloak caught Guy's attention. The blonde spun around but the street behind was empty, save for the last few merchants closing up shop. Guy hesitantly turned around, and continued down the small street to wards the main road. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of his stalker. The cloak hung down over the person's face, making them unidentifiable. Was it one of Cantabile's men?

No. Guy's memory suddenly kicked in. This mysterious hooded figure had been seated a few tables away when he and Cantabile had been fighting. Come to think of it, they had been just out of eye shot all day…. What were they after?

Guy slowed his pace and the person following got a bit closer, then in a sudden flurry of movement, Guy spun around and grabbed his pursuant, pinning them against the nearby wall. The stalker's hood slipped down revealing a head of bright pink hair and a woman grinning slyly at her captor. Guy jumped back, but his sword quickly took the place of his arm as her restraint.

"You're Noir from the Dark Wings, are you?" Guy demanded. The woman's smug grin confirmed his suspicions.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Noir still didn't answer.

"Why have you been following me?" Guy tried, this time bringing his sword threateningly closer to her neck.

"Who says I've been following you, sugar?"

"Don't screw with me," Guy replied coldly. "I'm really not in the mood for it right now. You've
been following me all day."

"I'm doing a favour for a cutie," the pink-haired woman replied with a wink.

"You think I'd believe that? You're after revenge for Chesedonia aren't you? Well you won't find
Asch and the others here."

"Oh please," Noir responded, rolling her eyes. "We're hardly that petty."

"Don't play me for a fool," Guy argued, his sword still inching closer to the bandit's throat. "You've
been in our shadow ever since then. I thought I saw you back in Baticul, but I figured I was just
seeing things. But then you were in Daath too, and in Sheridan. Everywhere we go, you've been. If
you're not after revenge, then what are you doing? How long have you been following us?"

Noir's smug grin remained on her face. "I've been following you long enough to know that you
wouldn't kill me."

"You know where the others are, don't you?" Guy continued, ignoring the truth behind Noir's
statement. "Tell me."

"If you're looking for your friends, I wouldn't bother," Noir provided. "They saw you and your
God-General friend enjoying yourselves so they grabbed the Fon Master brat and took off."

"They saw me?" Guy lowered his sword. Noir wasted no time slipping into the nearby alley and
vanishing into the slowly advancing darkness.

Damn it! Guy pounded the stone wall. What had they been thinking when they saw him, what
could have possibly gone through their heads? Guy couldn't even imagine. With everything that
had just happened with the curse slot… they had come in knowing a dirty truth. Ion had warned
him. Explained to him how a curse slot worked and told him how broken up Luke and Asch had
been about it. Now they showed up to save him, only to find him hanging out with their enemy.
How could he have been so stupid?! They had been here, they had taken Ion, and they had left.

They had left him. Now he had no one. Guy glanced back up at the cathedral, that was now
nothing more than a black outline against a blood red sky. Well, maybe he didn't have no one.

What a mess this had turned out to be.
Letting Go

Why was it that the longer they were gone, the more amazing Baticul's heights seemed to be when they finally returned? Though the recent betrayal of his best friend still weighed heavily on his mind, Luke couldn't help but embrace the overwhelming sense of relief that washed over him. He was finally home.

It had been a long time since they had been back to Baticul, and even their surroundings had begun to show it. The lush green trees surrounding the city had faded into various shades of gold and red, and many of their leaves had already fallen. The air had a cold bite to it, and while it would probably still be a month or two until the city got some snow, winter had set in. Luke let out an involuntary shudder.

'Cold?' Asch inquired.

'Just a little,' Luke sheepishly admitted.

'Then I guess it's a good thing we're going home,' Asch replied, the faint traces of a grin on his face. Luke was happy; it was the closest Asch had come to smiling in almost a week now. The trip from Daath to Baticul had been painstakingly long, and if someone tried to console either of them one more time, they would probably snap. Why couldn't everyone just stop talking about it? Guy was gone, and no amount of comfort was going to bring him back.

"Wow! It's really, really tall!" Mieu commented from his perch on Luke's shoulder. "I can't believe Master lives all the way at the top!"

Asch chuckled; despite everything that had just happened, he couldn't suppress the joy and relief that welled up inside of him as he watched the bustling streets of his hometown. He had been gone a lot longer than he had originally anticipated when he and Natalia had chosen to sneak off, and he was very glad to be back.

It had been long in coming too. Their trip from Daath had taken longer than anticipated. But by the second day, Noelle had pushed herself past her limits and even Jade insisted that they take a day off so she could rest up properly, rather than the scant few hours of sleep she had been allowing herself each night. Given the fact that the perky young pilot's hometown was only an extra 20 minutes out of the way, it had made for a convenient resting point. In the end, the unexpected stay in Sheridan had proven to be rather useful. They had managed to re-supply the Albiore II and visiting with Ginji had really helped take his mind off things for a bit. The first Albiore was almost finished its repairs, but much to Ginji's dismay, Iemon refused to deem it ready to fly, so the silver haired pilot was forced to wait before he could rejoin his friends on their journey.

But when they had departed again, Asch felt his sullenness return. The others kept trying to comfort him, but that only made it worse. They didn't understand at all. He didn't hate Guy nearly as much as he hated himself for being stupid enough to believe in him. After so many years, you'd think he would have known better. He should have been expecting it. So why did it hurt so much?

Beside him, Luke let out another shiver. Not surprising given the flimsy top he was wearing. While it worked just fine on a summer afternoon under a jacket, it wasn't in any way suited for Baticul as it bordered on winter.

"Natalia where are you going?" Anise piped up when the princess diverged from the group. "The lift is this way."
"There's something important I have to look into," Natalia replied.

"Natalia, don't go up to the castle alone," Asch interjected. "We should all go together. There's no saying what Mohs has told Uncle, or what he might do to make sure Uncle keeps believing it."

"Don't worry," Natalia smiled. "While you two stop in at the manor, I just want to verify something I heard while we were away."

"Okay," Asch finally decided. "But promise me you won't go up to the castle by yourself."

"I promise," Natalia took Asch's hand and looked him straight in the eye. "I won't try to go see my father. I'll meet you at your manor once I'm done and we can go together, okay?"

"Alright, I'll see you there," the redhead conceded as they watched Natalia make her way through the early morning crowd.

"You think she'll be okay?" Anise inquired. Natalia was no longer visible, even from the lift that they were now riding to reach Baticul's highest level.

"She'll be fine," Luke provided. "She knows Baticul like the back of her hand."

"Maybe, but she does tend to go a bit overboard sometimes. Do you think she really meant what she said about not going to the castle?" Anise asked rather sceptically.

"She may go overboard sometimes, but she's still got a good head on her shoulders," Asch replied. "She won't go up there on her own and risk jeopardizing this attempt to stop the war."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. It is all she's talked about for the past month," Anise rolled her eyes. "There was being passionate about something, and then there was Natalia. That girl was scary when she was on a mission."

"Can you blame her?" Tear asked. "She's a princess worried about her country, I think that's perfectly natural."

"Indeed, it's likely why the people here regard her so highly. As they do our troublemakers," Jade added with a smirk. Luke and Asch couldn't resist a smile. Making their way through Baticul had ended up taking ten times longer than it should have, every few feet they were met by another group of people overjoyed to see that they were alive and well. They could only imagine what a time Natalia must be having.

"Say Asch?" Luke asked once the last lift had come to a stop.

"What is it?"

"Why are we going home to the manor?"

"What kind of question is that?" Asch shot back. "Why wouldn't we go back home?"

"I know, but when we left Daath you were pretty avid about going home to the manor. Not to Baticul, not to the castle, to the manor. Why?"

"You were quite particular when we departed," Jade pointed out. "Might it have something to do with our defective comrade?" Asch didn't answer, but it didn't take a genius to figure out the answer.

"M-Master Luke! Master Asch!" One of the guards on duty at the manor's gates noticed the boys.
He almost didn't believe it at first, but when they had gotten closer, there was no doubt. He was so glad to see them both, and both relatively uninjured. The tense air that had settled over the manor after news had reached them of Akzeriuth had been unbearable. Everyone had been on edge and fraught with concern. Even the Duke, who normally spent a great deal of time away, had stuck close to home as of late; waiting, hoping beyond all hope for any sort of message that his children might have survived, that they might be okay.

"Shall we be going then?" Jade suggested.


"I'm glad to see you are both well! The Duke and Lady have been overcome with worry!"

"I somehow doubt Father was all that concerned," Asch mumbled to himself earning a jab in the side from Luke.

Though Baticul had changed over the course of their absence, their manor had not. The morning light was streaming in the windows from the courtyard and lit up the familiar room. Three pillars formed a grand archway and the vaulted ceiling only added to the grandeur of it all. The sole presence in the room was that of the guard, dutifully standing in front of the drawing room, and an older man, standing alone, staring up at a sword that hung decoratively on the nearest pillar.

"Père!" Luke called out to the gardener.


"Yeah, we're fine," Luke provided. Père's smile faded as his eyes passed through the group.

"Where's Guy?" He asked. Asch clenched his fists and an awkward silence settled throughout the entire room.


"I see," Père replied simply.

"You don't sound very surprised," Jade pointed out, eyeing the gardener suspiciously.

"He's always been one to follow his own path," the gardener explained.

"Ah, so you know him well then?" Jade inquired.

"I've worked with him here for many years, so I guess you could say that." Jade eyed the man, but ceased his interrogation.

"So what are you doing here in the entryway?" Luke inquired curiously. It was odd to see Père simply hanging around; he usually kept himself pretty busy outside and around the yard.

"Well the flowers don't need much tending this time of year so-"

"That sword," Asch cut him off, not buying the diversion that had easily satisfied his sibling.

"Oh this?" Père inquired.

"That sword belongs to Guy doesn't it?"

Luke looked up at the sword Asch was referring to. It was a beautiful blade, wonderfully crafted
with a golden hilt. The gold wrapped around a beautiful blue jewel that was set in the center. The blade hung straight and clean, untainted by the wear and stain of battle. It had been there for longer than Luke could remember. How could it belong to Guy?

"Ahh…" Père paused for a moment. "Well yes," he finally conceded. "Though one could technically say it belonged to his father."

"But what is Guy's dad's sword doing here?" Luke asked.

"Gaillardia Galan, son of house Gardios, one of the more prominent noble families on Hod," Jade provided.

"You knew?" Asch eyed the Colonel.

"I had my suspicions," Jade pushed his glasses back up with his forefinger. "So I looked into it while we were in Grand Chokmah."

"So Guy's actually a noble?" Luke still couldn't quite follow what they were all talking about.

"Yes," Jade provided. "A Malkuth noble at that."

"But how did you know that?" Luke inquired, this time requesting answers of his older sibling. How in all of Auldrant could Asch have known that?!

"It's his fighting style, isn't it?" Père spoke up.

"Yes, that and something he had mentioned to me on the Albiore when we were on the way to get Tear," Asch replied. "I didn't think anything of it at the time, but after everything that's happened, it started to bug me."

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"Asch," Guy hesitantly began. "Maybe I could explain a few things…"

"What's that?" The redhead replied with a smile.

"When I was young, the reason that I started working at your manor…" the young servant continued.

"What is it?" Asch looked at him curiously, the blonde's sudden hesitation spiking his curiosity.

"No, never mind," Guy dismissed the thought. "It's not important, forget I said anything."

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"It reminded me," Asch continued. "When we were younger, he used to stare at that thing when he thought no one else was around."

"Is his fighting style really that unique?" Tear inquired.

"Yes, the Sigmund style is a fighting style unique to Hod," Jade explained. "Very few people are left that are still fluent in it. Why do you ask?"

"Well it's just that Major Cantabile uses the same style," Tear explained. "She trained me since I was little but I wasn't aware she was from Hod."
"Cantabile?" Père's attention was drawn by the name of the God-General. "Cantabile is alive?"

"Ah, so you do know Guy," Jade slyly remarked. "More than just as a co-worker. Because, if I recall correctly, Cantabile was the name of the daughter of another of Hod's noble families. Just another little tidbit that caught my eye, after all, Cantabile isn't a very common name." Père bit his lip, but not in time to catch his blunder.

"You knew Guy before he came here?" Luke inquired, still struggling to keep track of what was going on.

"I did," Père confessed. "I was his sword instructor when we still lived on Hod."

"If I remember it right, Father was the one who led the forces to attack Hod," Asch pitched in. Things were finally starting to make sense.

"That's right," Père confirmed. "Duke Fabre was the one that attacked our household. The Lord and Lady were both killed as was the rest of his family. Most of the servants were also killed. It was a terrible war, many people were needlessly slaughtered and a great deal of hatred and resentment was born."

"If the Kimlascan forces resorted so low as to slaughter even the servants, how did the family's sole male heir survive?" Jade inquired.

"I can't say for certain," Père conceded. "I found him unconscious under the body of his sister and those of her attendants." Luke covered his mouth, his stomach lurching at the thought. Their father…had done that?

"It was Guy's decision to come work at the manor here," Père continued.

"He wanted revenge," Asch realized, the last piece of the puzzle falling into place. "He probably plans to kill us to get back at Father for killing his family."


"Perhaps he changed his mind over the years," Ion suggested. "Based on that fact alone, Sync could still use the Curse Slot to have him try to kill you. The feeling was there at one point, but it might not still be lingering."

"That still doesn't explain what we overheard," Asch pointed out bitterly.

"I still don't understand," Tear spoke up. "How does Major Cantabile fit into all this?"

"Cantabile…" Père muttered. "It's been a long time since I've heard that name."

"Did you know her too?" Anise asked.

"If it is truly the one that I'm thinking of, then yes, I knew her well," the gardener replied. "She was the youngest daughter of another prominent noble house. At one point her family was considering marrying her off to Guy, but the idea fell through and they eventually chose another lad. In spite of this, the two of them remained close friends, along with Van who served Guy at the time."

"Master Van was one of Guy's servants?!" Luke's astonished cry interrupted the elder man's tale.

"Yes and no, he was not a servant in our house. Rather, he was a member of the Fende household. For generations the Fende had served the members of House Gardios, and of course, Van and Guy
were no exception. The two were quite close as children. Guy always looked up to Van like an older brother. Along with Cantabile, the three of them were inseparable, they did everything together. I still remember how relieved Guy was when he and Van reunited after Hod."

"And they've been close ever since," Asch noted, saying everyone's thoughts aloud. "If he, Van and Cantabile have been close since they were kids, there's a pretty good chance Guy's been with them this whole time."

Guy was… Guy was with Master Van? All this time, he had been lying to them, deceiving them all? Luke just couldn't believe it; it was too hard to swallow. Guy had followed him to Akzeriuth; Guy had been there when he came back. Guy had been through everything with them, and his best friend had never let him down. Not once. Had all that kindness really been by design, just as Master Van's had been? Why was everyone he cared about being ripped away?!

"What's going on in here?" Duke Fabre's authoritative voice echoed in the entry hall where the manor's newest guests were now silently standing. He entered from the drawing room followed by his wife and a servant who was talking far too fast for either of her patrons to catch a word of it. Realizing she wasn't getting anywhere, the flustered young maid simply bowed and pointed at the crowd that stood near the door.

"Asch! Luke!" Susanne ran over and both her sons found themselves trapped in her embrace. Despite the fact that both of them felt that they were too old for such signs of affections, in front of their friends no less, the cold tears that fell onto their shoulders kept either of them from moving. Instead, they simply allowed themselves to relax and gently returned the gesture. "I'm so glad you're both alive, I was so worried!"

"We're sorry Mother," both boys replied in unison. Susanne let go of the two of them, but refused to allow them out of her sight as if she were afraid they would vanish again if she did.

"Where have the two of you been?" Duke Fabre stepped in. "Why didn't you promptly return after what happened in Akzeriuth?"

Asch scowled. Leave it to Father to find something to scold them about when they had finally made it home. "We were busy," Asch finally provided.

"And what is more important than returning home and letting us know you were safe?"

"I sent word, did you not get it?" Asch matched his father's look and tone.

"We received it, but there was no way of knowing it was truly from you. With war ready to break out, it could have easily been a ploy from Malkuth. You of all people should know that."

Asch simply rolled his eyes, muttering something about no one else possibly being able to know about the things he wrote down; but rather than start an argument with his father, Asch returned his attention to their mother who proceeded to interrogate him on the state of his wellbeing. Only Luke saw the relieved smile that graced their father's face once Asch's back was turned.

"Father," Asch spoke up after several minutes of conversation in the entryway.

"What is it?" Duke Fabre replied sternly, but not with the anger or scolding tone in his voice this time.

"May I have that sword on the wall?" Asch asked, meeting his father's look with an equally intense one of his own.
"But Asch, isn't that sword technically Guy's?" Luke asked hesitantly, afraid to interrupt Asch and his father's staring contest.

"Exactly," Asch replied. "If he really did betray us, then it's going to be the first thing he'll come after."

"Ah, so that's why it was so urgent to return to your manor," Jade realized. "You believe Guy may target it to retrieve his family heirloom."

"That's right, and if he wants it back, I want him to have to face us for it."

"Fine," Duke Fabre conceded. "You may have the blade. I'll get Ramdas to take it down and retrieve the sheath for you later."

"If possible, could you get him to retrieve it now?" Asch asked as politely as he could.

"It's really important that we go talk to Uncle right away," Luke explained. "We're not sure how long it's going to take or if we'll be able to stop by again before we leave the city."

"If you're looking to speak with my brother, it will have to wait until this afternoon anyway," Susanne provided.

"Why's that?" Asch asked. "Uncle has always seen guests this time of day."

"Not lately," their mother replied. "Every since Natalia disappeared, he hasn't been well. He only accepts guests for a few hours in the afternoon now. Where is Natalia, anyway?"

"Don't worry," Jade cut in. "Our vivid, young princess is fine, she's just tending to a personal errand. She should be joining us as soon as she's done."

"Well speak of the devil," Anise piped up, hearing the door handle turn behind them. "Your timing is scary, you know that?" The Fon Master Guardian commented to the princess that had just walked in the door.

Natalia walked in, but if she heard Anise's comment, she chose to ignore it. She seemed lost in thought, and something was clearly wrong. It was written all over her face.

"Natalia? Are you okay?" Her fiancée inquired.

"Oh," Natalia snapped herself out of the daze she was in, putting on a smile that didn't fool anyone. "I'm sorry, I'm fine. Hello everyone, sorry to keep you waiting."

"It's alright," Susanne smiled, giving her niece a much needed hug. "It's just nice to see that you're well, your father has been absolutely distraught since you disappeared." Natalia smiled, but somehow seemed even sadder than she had before.

"So," Natalia spoke up, trying to disperse the attention that was suddenly focused on her. "What are we waiting for? Shall we head to the palace?"

"No good," Asch provided. "Apparently Uncle isn't seeing anyone until later this afternoon."

"Oh," Natalia's shoulders sank.

"Why don't you all take the chance to rest here until this afternoon comes around?" Susanne suggested. "You look like you've been through a lot, and could use a chance to relax."
"Thank you very much for your offer," Ion replied with a courteous bow. "I think that would be a wonderful idea."

"Splendid," Susanne smiled. She was more excited than Luke or Asch had seen her in quite awhile. "I'll have the chef prepare something nice for lunch."

"Alright!" Anise cheered from the back of the room.

'Are you sure this is okay?' Luke asked as everyone began to happily chat. 'I mean I feel kind of guilty about being so close to the castle and just hanging out around the house.'

'We really don't have much choice,' Asch replied. 'Besides, even we need the chance to unwind every once in awhile. Don't take these opportunities for granted.'

Luke laughed. 'I guess you're right.' But a more serious thought crossed Luke's mind and his laughter immediately ceased.

'What is it?' Asch asked.

'Why do you want Guy's sword?' Luke was still confused.

'Exactly what I said. I won't let him sneak around us for the rest of his life; if he wants his family sword, he's going to have to face us for it. Why do you ask?' Luke didn't reply. 'You want to talk to him, don't you?' Asch realized.

'I do, I want to know why.'

'Knowing doesn't always make it easier,' Asch pointed out.

'I know, but I still want to know, no matter how painful it may be.'

'Good. If you truly believe that, then you'll eventually find your answers.'

"So where did Luke go?" Tear inquired, noticing the redhead's absence from the courtyard where everyone was sitting.

"I believe he went to fetch something warmer to wear," Natalia provided. The princess' mood had improved considerably over the past few hours, and while she hadn't actually shared whatever was bothering her, she seemed to have gotten over it. Maybe she was just disappointed she hadn't been able to find whatever she was looking for.

"I believe that's where Asch went as well," Ion provided. "It must be nice for them to finally be able to come home, they've been away for a long time now."

"They have," Natalia agreed.

"Oh! I'm sorry Natalia," Ion stated, suddenly realizing the implications and to whom he was speaking.

"Don't be," Natalia chuckled. "I'll make it home soon enough. But Asch is with his father right now, he's fetching that sword that Asch asked for."

"I wonder what Asch has in mind," Tear pondered.
"I bet you he's worried that this place could become a target," Anise pointed out. "I mean, like he said, if it's that important, Guy's bound to come after it eventually."

"I suppose you're right," Tear conceded. She didn't like the idea of thinking of Guy as the enemy anymore than the rest of them, but even she had to face the facts at hand: Guy wanted Asch and Luke dead, and she refused to lose either of them. They had both become too important to her.

"That's much better," Luke's voice came from the other end of the courtyard, where the noble in question had just walked through the door.

"There you are dear," Susanne replied somewhat disapprovingly, but failing to maintain any degree of discontent with her son. The Lady of the house had kept their company since they had decided to sit outside in the courtyard to avoid the constant hustle of the servants as they came and went. "It's rude to keep your guests waiting."

"I'm sorry, Mother," Luke apologized.

"Well you're here now, that's what matters," she replied with a smile. Wow, she sure went easy on him, Anise noted how quickly Susanne had lost her dismay at Luke taking his sweet time. It was a miracle Luke was disciplined at all if that was any example of his childhood.

"No way," Tear interrupted. "Not happening. Go change."


Tear only shot him a pointed look eyeing him from top to bottom. Luke had chosen a black jacket; almost identical to the one Asch was currently wearing, and a longer black top that covered his abdomen. Other than the tail of the jacket that was split in two to accommodate his sword and the yellow edging, it might as well have been Asch standing before them.


"I don't care what it is, just go find an outfit that doesn't look like something Asch would wear," Tear called after the redhead who stomped back inside. Across from the melodist, Natalia was in a fit of giggles. "What is it?" Tear's curiosity finally got the better of her.

"Something that Asch wouldn't wear?" Natalia snickered. "Have you seen their wardrobes?"

"Identical?"

"Pretty much," Natalia explained. "They're twins. People always thought it was cute to give them matching outfits."

"Man, that must have been a pain!" Anise exclaimed. "Not only are they practically identical, but they have all the same clothes? How did you stay sane?"

"Thankfully, they didn't really like the idea of having matching wardrobes either," Natalia replied with a chuckle. "Needless to say they're pretty good friends with a couple of the seamstresses here in town. Asch's favourite colour is red, Luke's is yellow, so you can usually use that to tell whose outfit is whose. Of course that means absolutely nothing when they switch."

"No kidding, those two are freakishly good at that," Anise grumbled. "I still haven't got it figured out. Come on Colonel, out with it! How can you tell?"

"Yes, I admit, I'm rather curious as well," Natalia conceded.
"What makes you think I can tell?" Jade taunted.

"Come on tell me!" Anise pouted.

"Like I said it's quite simple," the Colonel began. "It's simply a matter of calculation. Asch steps at 1.26 second intervals and Luke steps at an interval of 1.43 seconds."

"You're not funny, Colonel!" Anise stuck her tongue out at the man.

"I'm being perfectly honest," Jade shrugged.

"I just wish they'd stop doing it," Natalia commented.

"But you know," Ion began. "To them, it's really just a game, a way for the two of them to have fun. I mean, for them to manage it so flawlessly, they must be very close."

"I guess you're right," Anise admitted. "It's just annoying."

"But they don't mean any harm in doing it," Tear replied. "They're both just trying to lighten things up a bit, I mean, we all laugh about it later, right? Deep down, they're both really good people at heart. It's just so hard to believe that someone like that caused Akzeriuth to…"

"Tear…" Anise began hesitantly. "…didn't anyone tell you? You didn't yell at Luke about it or anything, did you?"

"What? Why?" Tear eyed the Fon Master Guardian. "Tell me what?"

"Tear… Luke wasn't the one responsible for the disaster in Akzeriuth," Ion explained.

"It was Van," Asch finished for the Fon Master, making his way into the courtyard. He must have slipped away to change because he was wearing a different outfit than the one he'd had on earlier. The jacket was shorter, though still black with blue bands on the sleeves. Rather than trailing behind him, this one didn't even reach down past his waist. He had a plain black top underneath his coat and the edging at the end of the long sleeves matching the blue bands of the jacket. His black pants were decorated with a set of belts that supported his own sword as well as the one they had seen in the entryway that he wore next to it.

"Yes," Duke Fabre also joined them in the courtyard. "Had I known the man was capable of such atrocity, I would never have allowed him in this house."

"What?" Tear sat dumbfounded as she listened to Asch explaining the facts to her. That her brother had tricked Luke into causing Akzeriuth to collapse, about how Luke had kept it a secret out of guilt because he blamed himself, everything. She didn't quite understand it all, like how Luke could have destroyed a passage ring? But she just couldn't bring the questions to her lips, so she remained silent. Why didn't he tell her? Why didn't he stop her when she had gone and lectured him about it? Or maybe he did, maybe he had tried to tell her, and she just wouldn't listen.

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"Tear, there's something I have to tell-"

"Please, let me finish this."

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She hadn't ever stopped to let him defend himself, not then, or after Akzeriuth. Not once had she
ever given him a chance. Knowing that, just how was she supposed to face him?

Duke Fabre and Susanne were also hearing this story for the first time. Jade watched the expressions on the two nobles quite carefully, and only he saw through the indifference on the Duke's face. He was equally talented in the art of hiding one's emotions, and it took one truly well versed to see through it. Something Asch wasn't quite capable of, and caused him a great deal of irritation as a result. Though whether it was that, or just the boy's usual caution that kept Asch from explaining the part about him and Luke being able to create a hyperresonance, Jade wasn't quite sure. It certainly didn't do much for Tear's understanding of the situation. Oh well, she'd find out eventually.

"Better?" Luke demanded, bursting back out in the courtyard, completely unaware of the topic of the conversation he had interrupted. Admittedly, his irritation at the fuss being made over his choice of clothing considerably lightened the mood. Clearly he had never needed to meet anyone's expectations as far as clothing was concerned. It certainly made one wonder why he was trying so hard all of a sudden.

Luke's second outfit looked surprisingly practical, especially considering who it was on. Like Asch, Luke had chosen a shorter coat, probably tired of the coat tails getting in the way in battle. This one still ran down to his knees but was more beige in colour than the one he'd abandoned in Yulia City. The edging was a rusty colour and matched the cuffs on the long-sleeved top he wore underneath. He wore a set of belts similar to Asch's but his sword was still strapped behind him, where the jacket split. On his feet he wore matching boots that looked far more durable than the shoes he had on before. All things considered, the ensemble he had put together looked rather good on him, and the colour almost seemed to resonate in his hair giving it a somewhat rusty hue.

"Much better," Tear replied, somewhat solemnly. She still couldn't shake the pit in the bottom of her stomach. But seeing as she wouldn't likely get a reason for Luke's lack of explanation without upsetting him, she let it go for the time being. Maybe she could bring it up later, but for now, she just didn't have the heart to drag him down. Not when his mood had finally picked up for the first time in a week.

"You know, what I don't get is why it's so cold here when it was so warm in Grand Chokmah." Luke inquired as he sat on one of the planters, taking an open spot in the circle that his parents and comrades had formed.

"Grand Chokmah is on the opposite side of the world, so their seasons are opposite from ours," Asch explained. "So while we're almost in winter here, they're just starting summer."

"I'd like to see Grand Chokmah in the winter time someday," Luke commented. "With all that water it must be really beautiful."

Susanne happily sighed as the conversation turned to the many places her sons had been. They had seen so many places and done many things, not all of them easy, not all of them pleasant. Especially Luke; he had been through a lot, but he had grown up so much in the short time he'd been away. She could see it in his eyes. He was so much more open minded, more aware of the world around him and the people in it. It was so wonderful, but at the same time, it was frightening.

For now he longed for that world. He yearned for the sky beyond the cage in which he'd been content all these years. It was as obvious to her as the sun overhead; the light that lit up in his eyes when he spoke of all those places he'd seen was unmistakable. To hold him up here would be all the crueler, so while she wished with every essence of her being for her boys to stay home where they were safe; she also knew that wasn't possible anymore. Luke had grown up somewhere along
the way, but she just wasn't ready to let him go.

"Lunch is ready!" One of the servants called across the courtyard.

"Let's go eat shall we?" Susanne suggested. "I had the chef prepare your favourite."

"All right!" Luke cheered and then proceeded to hurry everyone inside. But amidst the rolling eyes and stifled chuckles, Susanne couldn't help but smile.

Maybe he was still a child after all.

Man oh man what Anise wouldn't give to live a life like this. The food here was amazing, and she couldn't remember the last time she was so full. But she just had to try everything, it all looked so good! It would be a shame for any of it to go to waste, so what's an extra couple platefuls? Ion needed the sustenance anyway. He never ate enough, if it wasn't for her constantly shoving food in front of him, he'd be nothing but skin and bones!

But that wasn't the only reason lunch was good. Everyone at the table had been happy, and much more relaxed for the first time in quite awhile. Between Luke fretting over Tear, then Ion being kidnapped and now this whole Guy fiasco, it seemed like forever since everyone had been in a good enough mood to just sit down, eat, laugh and just enjoy themselves. It was a pity Noelle wasn't around, she probably would have loved to be in on it. Oh well, at least they could bring her some of the left over sandwiches.

"There you are Anise." The Fon Master Guardian jumped at the sound of Ion's voice.

"Don't scare me like that Ion!" Anise protested. She hadn't expected anyone else to join her in the otherwise empty entrance hall.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. I was just wondering where you were. What are you doing in here all by yourself?"

"Nothing really, just thinking I guess."

"Really? Thinking about what?"

"About everything," Anise replied nodding in the direction of the drawing room.

"I certainly was wonderful to see everyone happy and laughing again," Ion commented.

"Yeah, but I wonder if everyone's really as happy as they seem."

"What makes you say that?" Ion inquired curiously.

"Oh nothing," Anise dismissed the topic. "You know what else I was thinking about?"

"What's that?"

"You."

"Me?"

"Yes you." Anise replied in a tone of voice Ion knew meant only one thing: she was about to scold
him. "You don't eat enough; no one's going to be offended if you help yourself to seconds. It's no wonder your health is so bad, you have to take better care of yourself!"

Ion laughed, knowing full well the truth behind what she said. But that angry pout she gave him when she scolded him was amusing. Something about it put his mind at ease. It was nice knowing someone else was looking out for him.

"Thank you, Anise."

"Thank you? What for?" Anise was caught off guard by Ion's reply. Usually he would happily reassure her that he'd do exactly as she said which always meant that he wouldn't. But really, Anise wouldn't have it any other way. He wouldn't be Ion otherwise.

"For caring about me," Ion provided. Anise stuttered a bit but couldn't quite formulate a response to the Fon Master's unexpected response.

"Anyways, do you mind coming to join us?" Ion finally asked. "The others are preparing to head over to the castle, and we would appreciate your presence in the other room."

"There's no need," Natalia interrupted as she came through the door from the drawing room followed by the others. "We'll just join you in here."

"So what is our course of action?" Ion inquired once the entire group as well as both Duke Fabre and Susanne had joined them in the entrance hall.

"Well we don't really have a formal plan," Tear replied.

"Yeah," Asch confirmed. "We're just going to go see Uncle and hopefully we can talk him out of this. Natalia and I are both alive, so he shouldn't have any reason to want to continue with war. I can't think of any possible benefit war would have for Kimlasca beyond seizing territory, and that isn't something Uncle would do."

"Uh guys," Anise hesitantly spoke up, her face glued to the window. "I think we might have a bit of a problem."

"Why what's the matter?" Luke joined her at the window.

"What is it?" Jade demanded.

"Oracle Knights," Luke cursed. "And not just a couple of them; there has to be at least a dozen, and I bet there are more that I can't see from here."

"Damn, they must have realized we're here!" Asch pounded his fist against the nearby pillar.

"But how?" Tear asked.

"Enough people saw us on our way here," Jade provided. "It wouldn't be difficult information to obtain."

"Can we assume their objective is to stop us from getting to the castle?" Natalia inquired.

"I'd say that's a safe bet," Asch replied. "Mohs doesn't want Uncle to know we're alive."

"Yeah, I bet he's really pissed since Peony won't listen to him anymore," Anise stated.

"That's likely the case," Jade agreed. "He won't risk his hold over the world's other power. So what
"Is our plan?"

"Can't we just take them on?" Luke asked.

"We can't risk losing Ion," Asch replied. "If we lose and are captured, then that means they'll take Ion back to Daath. As much as I hate to say it, priority goes to making sure Van can't access any other passage rings."

"I hate to agree, but he's right," Natalia conceded. Everyone, including Asch turned to Natalia in shock. "What?" Natalia looked at them all, almost offended that they seemed so surprised. "If Van continues to access the passage rings, than even Kimlasca will end up falling into the Qliphoth. It will be easier to find another opportunity to get to the castle than to raise the land again."

"Our princess raises a very valid point," Jade agreed.

"This is nonsense!" Duke Fabre interrupted. "No one is going to keep my guests, my children, prisoner in their own house! I'll have the White Knights deal with these fools at once."

"No, don't!" Asch protested.

"Why not? I mean, if we can get to the castle, then all the better right?" Anise looked up at the redhead confusedly.

"If we cause an incident here now, then Father will lose favour in court and no one will be able to do anything," Asch stated before turning to the man he was speaking of. "Since we won't be able to make it to the castle, can I ask you to do your best to stop this war? I know it's not likely possible for you alone, but if you could delay things as much as possible, we'll go speak with Emperor Peony and try to work on relations from the other end."

"Of course we can," Susanne pitched in. "Don't you worry about a thing here, we won't let my brother do anything rash, now will we dear?"

Duke Fabre looked down at his wife who had just taken hold of his arm. She certainly picked odd things to be eager about. "No of course we won't," he finally provided. "This war has no justification, I won't see lives thrown away for nothing."

"Thank you, Father," Luke gratefully replied. "We'll do our best as well."

"That's great and all," Anise interjected. "But those guards are standing right outside your gate. Even if we don't intend to go to the castle, I highly doubt they're going to let us just stroll out of here."

"Leave that one to us," Luke replied with a wink.

"What do you plan to do?" Tear inquired.

"We'll show you when you get there, for now let's head out the back into the yard."

"Alright," Tear replied but still had a suspicious eye on the young noble. Just what did he have in mind? But for the time being she followed the others into the drawing room, leaving the Fabre family alone to say their goodbyes.

"Luke, Asch," Susanne began once the others had left, giving each of her sons a hug. "Please do be careful."
"Don't worry Mother," Luke replied. "We'll be back before you know it."

"Be sure to look after each other."

"We will Mother," Asch answered. "We always do."

"Thanks again," Luke stated with a polite bow towards their father. Luke was so glad he agreed to Asch's request. Yeah it was great that he would help stop the war, but more than that, it was a step in the right direction for both of them. Who knew, maybe someday Asch would finally realize that in spite of what he believed, their father really did care about him. Even if it wasn't as obvious as he'd like it to be.

"You just do your best," Duke Fabre replied sternly. "I'd expect no less from either of you."

"We will. Thank you for your efforts as well," Asch replied stiffly, echoing his little brother's gesture.

"Best of luck to both of you," Susanne stated with a smile. "But you'd best get going, you shouldn't keep your friends waiting."

"You're right," Asch agreed. "We'd better hurry. Goodbye." Asch finished with one last hug for his mother.

"Goodbye!" Luke waved enthusiastically as he followed his sibling out the door.

"They certainly have grown, haven't they?" Susanne whispered softly to her spouse once their sons were both gone, gently laying her head on his shoulder.

"That they have. Time goes by so fast."

"It does," Susanne chuckled. "I still remember when we just had Asch running around the house. It doesn't seem like all that long ago, now does it?"

"No, it doesn't." Duke Fabre agreed with a rare softness to his voice. "They've both changed so much since then. Not that they didn't cause their share of troubles along the way."

"Do you ever regret taking Luke in?" Susanne inquired gently.

Duke Fabre thought on it a moment. "No, if anything they've both grown because of each other."

"They both have a bright future ahead of them," Susanne replied with certainty.

"They will," Duke Fabre added with determination. "I'll make sure of it."

"Why am I not surprised you two have an escape route?" Anise stated sceptically as she eyed the part of the wall to which Asch and Luke had led them. Two nearby trees and worn out ridges in the stone made the barrier easy to climb, and the wear proved it had been used, and quite frequently. Luke just shrugged but didn't erase the mischievous smile on his face.

"You think you can climb it, Ion?" Luke finally asked, watching the Fon Master who was eyeing the wall hesitantly.

"I'm not sure," Ion admitted.

"Are you sure?"

"Sure, I've climbed this wall tons of times, it's not a big deal." Luke quickly proved his point by allowing Ion up on his back and began to scale the wall.

"But what about me?" Jade asked his voice drowned in a mocking tone. "Someone as old and frail as I couldn't possibly scale this wall all on my own."

"Well then we'll just have to use that thick skull of yours to make a hole in the wall and then you can walk through," Asch shot back with an equally mocking tone.

"My, my, such violence," Jade shrugged.

"Okay we're good!" Asch heard his sibling call from the other side of the wall.

"What's that about?" Tear asked.

"Only one person at a time," Asch explained. "You'll see once you're over."

"Okay," Tear replied as she grabbed a hold of the same branch she had seen Luke take. Following in his exact footsteps she quickly found herself on the other side of the wall. She immediately saw why Asch had said only one person could go over at a time. The landing on the other side was nothing more than a small observation station. At best it might fit three people, and it made landing a great deal more nerve-wracking. All it took was a misplaced step to send you tumbling over the edge.

"Over here," Luke called once Tear had both feet safely on the ground. She found him and the Fon Master standing on a walkway that presumably led them towards the lift. Once he had taken her hand, Luke called over the wall and slowly but steadily, everyone made it over, including Jade who, in spite of his earlier comment, probably made it over faster than any of them, with the exception of the twins.

"This should take us straight to the lift," Luke explained as they hurried along.

"Do you think they'll be okay?" Tear asked. "I mean, can they really stop the war on their own?"

"Not likely," Asch answered. "Father may be stubborn, but it's still going to be him against the rest of the court. War could still break out any day now."

"That's terrible," Tear replied.

"Yeah well, look at the bright side," Anise suggested. "At least we're not down another member."

Every one fell silent at her attempt to lighten the mood. It was still far too soon to be making jokes about Guy and his departure it seemed. Anise let out a frustrated sigh. Well they could be depressed all they wanted, but they'd better not be expecting her to walk on eggshells about it forever.

Asch continued along, Anise's crack putting a bad taste in his mouth, but at the same time, he wondered if maybe she didn't have the right idea. It's not like they had the time to be sulking around anyway. They had far more important things to handle, and he'd be damned if he let Guy ruin it all now.
They had almost made it out of Baticul, and still no one had said a word. Luke appreciated Anise's attempt to lighten the mood a bit, but it was just not the right time. Luke still didn't know what to make of it, especially as far as Guy was concerned. Guy really did have a valid reason; after all, Luke couldn't even imagine what his former best friend must have gone through. But at the same time, it also meant that what they had overheard in Daath was true. Guy really did want to kill both of them, and for all Luke cared about Guy, he wouldn't allow that. There was too much he had to do, and he wasn't going to let anyone hurt Asch either. But the thought of Guy as an enemy… that was something he still couldn't swallow. The sun peaked out from behind the clouds and the light reflected on the blue jewel inlaid in the blade at Asch's side and drew Luke's attention away from his thoughts.

It really was a beautiful sword. But would Guy really come after it? If he did, what would Luke say to him? What words could possibly make up for the death of his only family, the loss of everything he ever loved? Luke wanted to know why Guy did what he did, but deep down, he probably knew, he just couldn't accept it. Even with the truth spelled out for him to see, in all its harsh reality, he wouldn't be satisfied until he heard it from Guy himself. Not until he saw his friend one last time.

But when that time finally came, would Luke really be able to let go?
Van let out a heavy sigh, dropping to one knee. He glanced around as his heavy breathing settled, glad that no one was in the immediate area. Weakness was a luxury he wasn't allowed anymore and he wouldn't let any of his subordinates believe any different. But things had proven to be more trying than he had initially anticipated.

His stomach lurched, more violently than the last time, but not unexpectedly. Curse these damn things. Yulia had been foolish in her designs, too naïve in believing they should never have to be used, or perhaps simply forgetting such an obvious source of contamination. She had overlooked such a simple matter, a blunder that impeded him now. But if it took every last drop of blood in his body, he would see this through to the end. Van forced his stomach to settle, refusing the dizziness that begged him to rest. He hadn't earned such a privilege yet. Not until that Score was nothing but a long forgotten nightmare.

It didn't bother him though, not nearly as much as the fact that this Score-forsaken illness was slowing his pace. He should have easily been able to have everything in place by now, and with that fool and the fool's replica following in his footsteps, he needed to work faster.

His lack of strength was limiting him, slowing him down and things were only getting worse. It had seemed simple to deal with the first couple, but now it took everything he had to get simply one of them in place. The amount time that he required to fully recover was increasing as well, not that such a break was unnecessary otherwise. There were many other things he had to ensure were set in place, projects to oversee, fools to deal with, so much needed to be done before his goals could be realized.

But he still had time, at least for now.

Asch's actions had proven to be unexpected, resourceful even, and it was starting to become bothersome. Though he was only stalling the inevitable for now, what concerned Van most of all was what he could eventually do, given what he'd already accomplished. Thankfully Mohs, and his idiotic devotion to the Score, was keeping the little monarch busy, but that wouldn't last forever.

The boy was foolish, blinded to a truth Van had been unable to instil in him over the years. But he would eventually see. Of that, Van had no doubt, and he would do anything and everything to make sure of it. He needed the boy and his unique abilities; there was no way around that. The Commandant cursed the replica who still had Asch in its clutches; because of it, the seed he'd planted had yet to sprout. He should have killed the thing in Akzeriuth himself and saved himself the trouble. He certainly wouldn't make that mistake a second time. Though it may involve the use of a trump card he had hoped to save for later, he was beginning to run out of time.

He still had time, but that time was swiftly running out.

Raindrops crashed against white marble buildings of Malkuth's capital as everyone hurried towards the palace. Dark grey clouds hung low in the sky, casting an ominous shadow over the normally sparkling city that was now illuminated only by the periodic flash of lightning across the sky. Though his soaking red hair clung to his face and his wet jacket sat heavily on his shoulders, Luke couldn't help but feel cheerful, a fact that seemed to be antagonizing Natalia who thoroughly hated storms. But Luke had always loved the rain, and puddle jumping was still secretly on his list of
favourite ways to pass the time.

Storms on the other hand, were just as exciting and the bright lights and loud crashes had always fascinated him, almost to the same extent they drove Natalia into her fiancé's arms. Though she refused to show any signs of weakness now, Luke could still see her cringe at every clap of thunder.

By the time they finally reached the palace doors, all seven of them were thoroughly soaked, including Jade, who was normally immune to the elements. Asch and Luke's jackets both fell heavily to the floor, splashing more water onto their respective owners as they were temporarily discarded.

But Luke and Asch weren't the only ones trying to get rid of the excess water. Not that Grand Chokmah was foreign to rain with all the water nearby, but at the very least they should probably try to look presentable. Anise finished extracting the water from her raven locks, the pigtails they were confined to giving her hair some semblance of order. Everyone else on the other hand, wasn't quite so lucky, including the Colonel. Apparently the seemingly untouchable Colonel only repelled water to a certain extent, after which point the elements won. Anise tried to stifle her laughter. She thought his hair had been straight before, now it hung like needles down in his face, hiding his rather annoyed red eyes.

"Colonel, you look like a wet cheagle," Anise managed through fits of giggles.

"What?" Mieu looked up from where he was jumping in the puddles everyone had created on the floor in the entryway. The furry blue creature was the only one who had managed to stay relatively dry, having taken shelter under Luke's coat. While it may not have saved him from all the rain, he was certainly in a much better condition than the rest of them.

"Not you, Mieu," Anise continued to laugh, joined by several of the others who couldn't deny the truth in her statement. None of them had ever seen Jade in any sort of disarray before; it was so unlike him, it was hilarious.

"I think it's a good look for you," Asch shot.

"You as well," Jade shot back, brushing his dripping auburn hair out of his eyes. "But we already knew that, didn't we?"

Asch grumbled at being reminded of his defeat in the Cheagle woods, but chose not to retort, especially since Jade wasn't the only one having fun. Luke, Asch and even Tear were all fighting with the long hair that still clung to the backs of their necks and sides of their faces sending more water cascading down onto the outfits they had just wrung out. It was a completely hopeless venture.

"Natalia?" Asch began, having gathered all his crimson hair into his hand. The young princess looked up and must have guessed at what her fiancée was going to ask her, for she immediately began digging in her small pack. A moment later she pulled out a pair of hair ties and passed them over to the redhead, who then forwarded one to his sibling.

"Thanks," Asch replied with a smile. Both he and Luke quickly pulled their unruly hair back and bound it in a ponytail. It was good enough for now, at least until it dried.

"You two don't look to bad like that," Anise commented. "You should let me braid it sometime. Ion's hair isn't long enough to do anything fun with."

"Why's that?" Tear asked, finally managing to get her own hair relatively free of water.

"He let Mother do it once while it was wet and it ended up wavy for days," Asch explained with an evil grin.

Tear burst out laughing and Luke sent Asch an evil glare. Tear felt bad laughing, and she had fully intended not to, but the thought of Luke with wavy hair was just too funny! Luke grumbled and stomped inside followed by Asch, Jade and Ion with a cheagle on his shoulder, leaving the girls alone in the entry hall.

"But you know," Anise said slyly. "If she braided Luke's hair, what are the odds she braided Asch's too?" Natalia burst into giggles.

"Probably pretty good," Tear managed. All three of them were in stitches picturing the twins with varying degrees of wavy hair.

"We'd better get going," Natalia finally managed, still trying to catch her breath. It had been ages since she'd laughed like that. "The boys will be wondering what's keeping us."

"Yes," Tear agreed. "And we have important matters to attend to as well."

"Well nothing says we aren't allowed to have any fun along the way," Anise commented.

"You're right," Natalia agreed. "But let's hurry along before they send a search party, shall we?"

"Man, those guys are so uptight sometimes," Anise pouted.

Natalia laughed, "Yes, boys will be boys."

"I see," Peony contemplated, sitting back in his throne. They had just finished telling him their story, and quite frankly, the young ruler wasn't too sure what to make of it. It was really quite the story. But he liked these kids, those twins in particular. They had that air about them that had him eating right out of their hands. A sincerity about their manner that you didn't see all too often these days. The real question is what would the rest of the council make of it?

"This is folly!" Nordheim protested once Asch had finished speaking. "You mean I am to believe you, the heir to the throne, would betray your own country? You would turn on your own people to bring us news of war? Your majesty, this must be some sort of scheme!"

"Well Asch?" Peony looked the youth straight in his emerald eyes. "Nordheim has a point, what do you have to say?"

"Your Majesty, I don't believe that I am betraying my people," Asch replied. "My Uncle is being misled by Grand Maestro Mohs who, for some reason wants a war between our countries. I sincerely hope that this war doesn't happen at all, but of that, I am starting to become doubtful. I believe that by reporting this information, and by allowing you to be prepared to defend yourselves, less innocent lives will be lost, both for Malkuth and for Kimlasca. I don't report this with intent to do harm, only with hopes to protect those who shouldn't have to be involved in our political games."
"But many lives will still be lost," Peony pointed out. "More Kimlascan soldiers will die than would have, had we been unprepared for their initial assault."

"It's war, of course lives will be lost," Asch conceded. "Soldiers serve with the knowledge they may have to lay down their lives for their country, which is why we have to protect as many lives as we can; to save the places and the people that they are willing to die for."

Peony smiled, he certainly was well spoken, and he'd expect no less from the young noble. He would make for a great leader someday. "I couldn't have said it better myself," Peony finally spoke up when neither of his advisors issued any further protests. "Unfortunately, what comes next is up to the council. Nordheim. Sesseman." The ruler nodded to the two men at his side.

"Yes, your Majesty, we'll summon the council at once," both men replied in unison before excusing themselves from the audience chamber.

"I gotta say, I'm pretty impressed," Peony replied with a grin once the men were gone. "You guys really went beyond your call on that one."

"It was no trouble at all your Majesty," Luke replied.

"Something is bothering me though," Peony's face grew serious. "From what you guys told me, it seems like Mohs knew you were in the city, and not just in the city, he knew exactly where to find you."

"Yeah, we know," Asch replied, losing the formal tone he had just moments ago. "We're still not sure exactly how that information got to him."

"Well as long as you're careful," Peony shrugged. "There's no way that guy's getting in this court again after what he pulled, but it's looking like he's still got quite the hold on Kimlasca."

"I'm afraid so," Asch admitted.

"Don't be so down, you tried your best. It sucks, but things don't always work out the way you hope they will. A good leader is someone who can turn something like that around, and still pull through in the end."

"You're right, thank you, your Majesty," Asch replied with a small bow. Peony laughed.

"My, my, corrupting your future competition? Shame on you, your Majesty," Jade said in a mockingly scolding voice. Everyone in the throne room laughed, the mirth echoing off the walls and lightening everyone's spirits.

"Well the council will probably be gathering soon, but before I go, I have one last tidbit for you," Peony winked.

"What's that, your Majesty?" Luke asked curiously.

"Frings is coming back with a report on 's condition," Peony grew serious again. It was amazing how he turned his carefree attitude on and off like that. But either way, if Peony was serious about something, it must mean that it was really bad. "If he's coming himself and not sending it through the usual means, it's probably not good news," Peony confessed. "He'll due to arrive by tomorrow at the latest, so if you want to stick around to hear his report, you're more than welcome to. I'll also be able to fill you in on the council's decisions that way."

"Thank you, your Majesty," Natalia said with a bow.
"Yeah thanks, we'll take you up on that," Asch added.

"Well in that case, why don't you snatch a couple rooms here at the palace? It'll save you going back out in that storm."

"Please!" Natalia jumped on the emperor's offer.

"Well, well, I'm honoured," Peony replied with a mischievous grin that could give Jade and the twins' a run for its money.

"Your Majesty is too kind, to offer such beautiful young women a place to stay," Jade taunted. "Certainly you aren't planning to take advantage of such a situation."

"Shut up, you sleep outside," Peony cut Jade off.

"Your Majesty," Norheim returned an hour or so later, interrupting everyone's conversation when he called from the entrance to the throne room. "The council has gathered!"

"Well," Peony stood up. "That's my cue. I'll try and catch up with you guys for supper, okay? I'll have a couple of the maids prepare the guest rooms for you. Jade knows where they are. In the meantime, feel free to relax. You guys deserve it."

"You don't really think he would…." Tear trailed off as she watched Peony leave the audience hall.

"He would what?" Asch asked.

"Well…" Tear stuttered. "You know…like the Colonel said… take advantage…"

"Nah," Asch shook his head. "The only old man we have to worry about is standing right next to us."

Everyone simultaneously turned their head to the left, including Jade who was on the leftmost outskirt of the group.

"Where? I don't see anyone," Jade replied in his mocking tone.

"Find a mirror, you'll figure it out," Asch shot back.

"My, my, and here I was thinking of giving you a tour," Jade replied as the group made their way down the stairs.

"I'll pass thanks; you'll probably be busy setting up a bed outside," Asch added with a malicious grin.

"Okay you two, enough is enough," Tear interjected before Jade had a chance to reply. The Colonel simply shrugged and continued along leading everyone down the main staircase and into the left wing.

"So where are the bedrooms?" Asch haphazardly inquired. "I would love to get into something dry. Thank Yulia for waterproof packs."

"Yeah rub it in," Anise grumbled. Her pack had a hole and water had leaked in so even her spare uniform was wet. But at least it was drier than what she was wearing.

"I wonder if they have any hot chocolate…" Luke wondered. Other than a towel, that was probably the one thing he'd love to see the most right about now. Their wet clothes had all of them chilled to
the bone, except Jade who, despite having succumbed to water, had yet to be defeated by temperature.

"That would be wonderful," Ion agreed.

"Well, once we get changed we can head over to the kitchens and inquire," Natalia suggested.

"That sounds like a plan to me," Asch nodded in agreement.

"First things first, we need to find the guest rooms," Tear pointed out.

"True," Asch agreed. "So old man? Where are they?"

"I thought you didn't want the grand tour?" Jade taunted.

Asch grumbled in defeat.

"Shut up and walk."

The soft melody gently flowed out of the room, entrancing the few souls that happened to walk by. Luke stood outside the door, his hand resting on the handle, happily listening to the gentle music. They really were beautiful. Tear's voice melded with the ancient melody and the resulting hymn put his heart at ease. He hated to interrupt her song, so he waited for her to come to the end of the second hymn to knock on the door.

The gentle knock was drowned out as the melodist continued on into another hymn that Luke hadn't heard before. Didn't Tear only know the first two? There was no doubt it was Tear's voice that was singing… Luke really didn't want to interrupt her, but if he waited much longer, everyone would be waiting on the two of them to eat. Luke knocked a little bit harder this time, and successfully drew the melodist's attention.

"Who is it?" Tear's voice sounded startled. Luke softly opened the door and peeked in. "Oh Luke, come on in, I didn't realize you were out there."

"Sorry to bother you Tear, but I heard you singing and… well…"

Tear chuckled. "You could have knocked sooner."

"I didn't want to interrupt you," Luke confessed. "I really do like your hymns, they're so pretty."

"Th-Thank you," Tear stuttered.

"Were all those hymns Yulia's?"

"That's right."

"I don't remember ever hearing you sing the last couple," Luke commented. "How many of them do you know?"

"I only just recently learned the third and fourth hymns," Tear explained. "When I was in Yulia City, a friend of mine found one of my brother's old books." Tear went to the table next to her bed and pulled out a worn, leather-bound journal from her pack. "There were some notes on the last couple pages that we hadn't seen before. From that I was able to decipher the next couple hymns."
"I'm still working on the last three though."

"It sounds like Master Van was a pretty good brother," Luke said gently.

"He was," Tear smiled. "He was away a lot when I was younger, but he was always so kind to me." She gently fingered her sibling's faded writing next to the hymns' lyrics.

"You'll figure those hymns out, I know you will."


"You should sing them more often, they really are beautiful," the redhead said with a smile. "But we'd better get to the dinner table or Anise is going to eat it all without us."

Tear laughed and accepted Luke's arm. Walking with him, feeling the warmth of his arm within her own, put her heart at ease and the worries that she had been trying to drown in her songs so easily succumbed to his presence. It was times like this that she truly believed that everything would be alright.

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Their stay in Grand Chokmah ended up proving to be rather… unique. Between a herd of uniquely named rappigs, several pigsties (that ironically belonged to Peony and not his favourite pets), more information over dinner than any of them ever wanted to know, and an incident in the girl's bedroom involving a lecherous ruler and several conveniently placed mirrors; everyone was glad to find themselves back in the audience hall the next morning with sun shining in through the window. Though the storm had lasted through the night and kept most of them from getting any extensive sleep, things had cleared up nicely and the sky was a deep azure, unlike anyone had seen in quite awhile.

"I am General Aslan Frings," a man with silver hair stood before them and introduced himself. His adorned blue uniform confirmed him to be a ranking member of the Malkuth military, and of a higher rank than Jade. He had an air of pride about him, but not one of conceit. "My troops are currently stationed in St. Binah. I have already presented my report to the council this morning, but his Majesty has asked that I give my report to you as well."

"Thank you very much General Frings," Asch replied. "This means a lot to us."

"It's no trouble at all; in fact, I'm hoping that you might be able to shed some light on this new weapon Kimlasca is using."

"New weapon?" Luke looked up confusedly, an expression that swept through the rest of the group.

"We had originally suspected that Akzeriuth's fall was due to some new weapon Kimlasca had built," Peony explained. "Of course, we know now that isn't the case, but word hasn't exactly gotten out. You'll have to forgive me for not spreading it around, but I think you know why."

"Most people would be unable to accept the truth," Natalia provided. "I must admit, had I not been in the Qliphoth, I might not have believed it myself."

"Your Majesty?" Frings looked back at the emperor in search of an explanation.

"Please continue with your report, Aslan," Peony requested. "I'll fill you in on everything once
"we're done."

"Yes, your Majesty." Frings returned his attention to the people before him. "Lately the land surrounding St. Binah had begun to sag. We thought little of it at first, but it has reached the point now that several of the streets have begun to crack. Though that may be partially due to the earthquakes that have been happening more frequently as of late, we aren't sure at this time. Many of the citizens are quite anxious, but we dare not abandon the city with war so close. Kaitzur is filled to capacity with Kimlascan forces, therefore abandoning St. Binah now is simply not an option."

"So you see my dilemma," Peony interrupted. "Thanks Aslan," the ruler nodded to the young general who bowed and returned to his place beside Sesseman. "Thankfully, with the information you brought us yesterday, the council has become more willing to take your word at face value, and we're willing to abandon St. Binah. The problem is, that with reinforcing all our other defences, we don't have the troops to spare for the evacuation. Are you sure that St. Binah is going to fall like Akzeriuth did?"

"If left alone, yes," Asch replied who was subsequently supported by a nod from Jade.

"I believe he is right in that assumption," the Colonel agreed. "St. Binah was partially supported by Akzeriuth's Sephiroth which no longer exists. It has likely only been hanging on by drawing on the strength of the other Sephiroth, but with them weakening, it isn't all that unreasonable to believe it would fall into the Qliphoth."

"Is there anything you can do to stop it?" Peony inquired.

"We don't know, your Majesty," Asch admitted. "But we intend to try."

"Your Majesty!" Luke spoke up.

"What is it Luke?" Peony acknowledged the second young noble.

"You don't have the extra people to evacuate St. Binah, right? Let us handle the evacuation with the troops that are already there. If we use the Albiore, we can speed things up a lot, and can make sure that everyone gets out, even if we don't succeed in stopping the land from falling."

"Thank you, Luke. I thought it would be too much of me to ask you to save the people of your enemy."

"Your Majesty," Natalia interjected. "I do not believe that Malkuth is Kimlasca's enemy, and I sincerely hope that we are not considered yours. Our people travel across our border as if it were nothing."

"I agree," Asch supported his fiancée. "People aren't denied food or shelter because of their nationality, because, in the end, we're all still people. I stand by what I said before; it's irrelevant what country a person is from, lives are lives. If that truth can't hold now, it never will, and we'll be at each other's throats forever. It's our job, as the nobility, to help those in need of it and to set an example for the future."

"Well spoken," Peony smiled. "For that I thank you. I hope once all this is sorted out we can work on our countries' relations."

"I sincerely hope for that as well," Natalia replied with a courteous bow.

"But time isn't on our side, we should get going," Jade pointed out. "I doubt the city's condition has
improved in the time it took for General Frings' report to arrive."

"Could I ask a favour of you?" The General in question spoke up.

"What's that?" Asch asked.

"Could I accompany you on your journey to St. Binah?"

"Of course," Asch replied. "I'm sure you're concerned about your men, and we could use all the help we can get with the evacuation."

"Thank you."

"I wish you the best of luck," Peony said, ending their audience. "Please save them, they are my dearest people."

"Don't worry, your Majesty. We won't let anything like Akzeriuth happen again," Asch reassured the monarch.

Luke clenched his fists, but chose not to voice his thoughts that ran along the same lines as his older brother's. It was just like Akzeriuth, he was being sent to help save the people of St. Binah, and without their help, they would probably die. But this time he wasn't going to make the same mistakes, he was going to save them.

It was the only thing he could do for the shadows that still haunted his dreams.

Luke couldn't really identify why he had a pit in his stomach as he watched the Albiore fly off into the sky, but something within him was unsettled. Was it because everything was so like Akzeriuth? Was he afraid of screwing up again? That more people would die?

"Do you think Noelle will be okay on her own?" Anise inquired.

"She'll be fine," Jade replied. "General Frings will recruit the help of General McGovern and his father, who was also in the military, to assist him. They'll be more than capable of getting the evacuation underway. We have more important things to take care of here."

"Yeah, but..." Anise trailed off. "Where are we going to find a passage ring around here? We're in the middle of nowhere!"

The Fon Master Guardian had a point. Though Ion had been able to provide the general area, the local forests had limited Noelle's ability to land and they had to settle for a field slightly south of where they wanted to be.

"I'm certain this is the area," Ion reassured them. "Shurrey Hill is just north of here."

"Then let's hurry so we can be ready for when Noelle comes back," Asch replied.

'What's the matter?' Asch finally asked his sibling. Though, for the most part, they had been walking in silence, Luke seemed to be exceptionally quiet, and had spent most of their walk staring at the ground.

'Do...Do you really think we can save St. Binah?' Luke inquired hesitantly. He didn't want to ask... probably because he was scared of the answer.
'We won't know unless we try,' Asch answered comforting.

'But what about the people in St. Binah? What if we screw up!'

'Luke, right now, the best thing we can do for these people is to find the passage ring, and try to keep the land from falling. Frings understood that, and he's putting his life and that of his men in our hands. We owe it to them to do our best.'

'You're right, I'm sorry.'

'Try not to worry,' Asch put his hand on his little brother's shoulder. 'We just have to do whatever we can, and hope for the best. There's really nothing else we can do.'

'We have to stop Master Van,' Luke's statement caught his sibling off guard. 'He's the one doing this, isn't he?'

'Yeah, probably.'

'Why? Why is he putting all these people in danger? Why is he trying to drop all the Outer Lands?'

'I wish I had the answer to that for you, Luke,' Asch admitted. 'But I don't. For now, let's make sure these people stay safe and alive.'

'You're right, thanks Asch.'

'You're welcome, now get your butt in gear, we're falling behind. Nothing's going to get started without you.'

'Nothing's getting started without you either,' Luke pointed out.

'Maybe,' Asch chuckled as he jogged ahead. 'But I'm not the one falling behind.'

"Hey!" Luke called after his sibling and began to give chase, quickly sending both redheads flying past their comrades.

"It's nice to see them in such good spirits," Ion commented as the two boys had begun playfully sparring ahead of them.

"It is," Tear replied as she watched the small scuffle. Even in their games Asch clearly had the advantage. Tear recalled the last time their blades had met, and it sent a shiver down her spine. Only now, when she thought back on it, did she realize the harsh reality of Luke's condition at the time. They had to save St. Binah, they had to stop her brother. She didn't want either of them to have to go through anything like that ever again.

"Now as long as they don't wear themselves out before we get there," Jade commented with a defeated sigh.

"I still like them better worn out than depressed," Anise pointed out.

"Yes, dear Anise, so do the God-Generals," the Colonel taunted.

"We should be arriving soon," Ion stated with a bit of a chuckle at Jade's comment. As true as it was, he had to agree with Anise. He hated seeing his friends as upset as the two of them had been since they had lost their comrade a few weeks ago. It had really only been in the past week or so that they had started to smile again, so while what Jade said was a valid point, he wasn't going to be the one to stop them, and he suspected that the Colonel wouldn't either.
After all, now came the hard part: saving St. Binah, if it even could be saved. The people, Ion
didn't doubt would survive, so long as the evacuation finished in time, but he feared that the city
itself may be a lost cause. Time was working against them, and for all he sincerely hoped they
would make it, something told him that their time had already run out.

If there was one thing Luke would give Yulia credit for, it was designing these passage rings;
assuming she was the one that built them of course. Just how she had figured out the best way to
hide them all, he'd never know. But the array of devices and tricks that she had utilized were
nothing short of awe-inspiring. Then there was the decor, though whether it had been Yulia's
design, or just a result of the fonons that gathered so readily, Luke wasn't too sure, but he loved it.

For all that the passage rings filled him with dread and turned his stomach into a twist tie, he
couldn't deny their beauty. Like the previous two, glyphs whirled around the rooms in an array of
colourful lights, drawing onlookers into its eternal dance. Tear in particular seemed in awe of it all,
but who could blame her? Especially since she'd never seen a passage ring other than Akzeriuth,
and something told Luke she hadn't exactly had the chance to take in the sights.

"It looks like the Yulian seal has been broken here as well," Jade commented, having been the first
to investigate that fact.

"Not surprising seeing as Van's already been here," Asch commented.

"True," Jade conceded. "Tear, do you by chance know anything about breaking the Yulian seals?"

"No, I'm afraid not," Tear replied.

"But Tear, aren't you and Master Van descended from Yulia?" Luke asked. "I thought that was
why Master Van knew how to open them."

"If it was a knowledge passed down through my family, then Van would be the one who knows,"
Tear explained. "My parents died just after I was born, and my brother never liked to talk about the
past."


"It's alright," Tear smiled

"Well as much fun as I'm sure you two lovebirds are having flirting and all," Anise commented
slyly, eliciting a blush from the two teens to whom she was referring. "I think we'd better get
working. We don't exactly have all day, and they could probably use our help with the evacuation."

"She's got a point," Asch shrugged, all too amused at Luke's reaction to Anise's taunting. He
laughed outright when Luke noticed the grin on Asch's face and turned bright red. But with his
attention so focused on his younger sibling's embarrassment, Asch failed to pay attention to where
he was going and ended up walking right into the melodist. Tear was sent staggering backwards
before crashing to the ground next to the pedestal that had been Asch's destination before running
into her.

"Sorry Te-" But the words hadn't even come out of his mouth. Above where the young oracle
knight was rubbing her shin that had taken the brunt of the fall, the pedestal was open, and the
passage ring was active. But how? She wasn't even touching it.
"Now this certainly is interesting," Jade commented.

"What's interesting Colonel?" Tear inquired as she stood up and returned to join the group. As soon as she stepped away from the pedestal, it slammed shut and the passage ring returned to its slumber.

"Tear, could you stand near that pedestal again?" Jade requested. The melodist did so, and as soon as she did, the pedestal opened once again.

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me," Asch muttered under his breath.

"I wonder why it reacts so readily to you…" Jade pondered aloud. "Any Seventh Fonist can activate it, but perhaps it's more sensitive to your fonon signature because you're a descendant of Yulia? At any rate," Jade continued without waiting for an answer. "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to hold that open for us."

"C-Certainly Colonel," Tear hesitantly approached the pedestal and placed her hands on it, stabilizing the flow of Seventh Fonons. She watched Jade take a step back and ponder the glyphs that had appeared on the ceiling. Her gaze shifted, and she was taken aback to find herself under Asch's judging, and rather hateful glare.

"Um, Asch… i-is something the matter?" Tear finally asked. Jade took his attention away from the ceiling for a moment to judge the situation before returning to the glyphs.

"Oh don't mind him," Jade commented as he continued to decipher the many messages that had appeared. "He's just jealous. When he had to hold that pedestal open, he ended up passing out from the effort." The colonel felt Asch's foot come crashing down on the toe of his boot. It was a shame they were reinforced with metal, perhaps next time.

Luke snickered as Asch continued his intense scrutiny of the melodist. It wasn't often Asch got shown up, and he was obviously a sore loser in that regard. But now that Tear knew the reason behind Asch's rather childish jealousy, his gaze no longer innerved her and she too attempted to make heads or tails of what the passage ring said.

"It's locked," Tear stated, not realizing everyone already knew that was likely to be the case. "My brother closed off the valve so we won't be able to operate the Sephiroth!"

"That's not my primary concern," Jade replied.

"What has you worried Colonel?" Anise asked. The tone in his voice meant that it must be really bad.

"Wait a second!" Luke jumped in. "Why are there four red rings?"

"Zao ruins," Asch ticked each location off his fingers as he listed the locations. "Shurrey Hill, Megi-" Asch cut himself short when he realized what Luke was getting at. "We already dealt with the one in the Meggiora Highlands, and Akzeriuth is gone, so there should only be two!"

"But there are definitely four," Anise stated. "Can you tell what passage rings, Colonel?"

"The ones supporting Daath and the area near Tataroo Valley," Jade provided. "I can't determine the actual location of the Sephiroth from here."

"But Ion, I thought you only opened four of them!" Anise protested. "They didn't make you open any when they kidnapped you from Grand Chokmah did they?"
"No, I'm sure only four of them should be open," Ion confirmed.

"So how is the Commandant accessing the other passage rings?"

"I don't know, but we don't have the time to worry about that now," Jade replied sternly.

"He's right," Natalia agreed. "This is a matter we can address later. For now we have an obligation to the people of St. Binah."

"I don't think there's much we can do but get them out of the city," Jade stated.

"What? Why not?" Luke demanded. "Can't we do the same thing we did last time and stop the land from falling?"

"It's no good Luke," Tear spoke up. "My brother put in some kind of code that's blocking it of. We can't do anything."

"This Sephiroth is already past its breaking point," the Colonel explained. "There's no way of saving it, if you tie it to another, you'll drag them both down."

"So St. Binah is just going to fall and sink into the miasma like Akzeriuth? And we can't do a thing about it?" Luke shook his head violently. "No! I won't accept that! There has to be something we can do!"

"Luke…" Tear wanted to go comfort the young noble, but was stuck keeping the passage ring open.

"We can't stop the land from falling, but is there anyway to at least keep it from sinking?" Asch suggested. Jade pondered for a bit, his eyes still fixed to the glyph overhead.

"That might be possible, though it will be far more complex a task than last time. Do you think you'll be up to it?" Jade fixed his ruby eyes on the redheads.

"What do you think Luke?" Asch asked. "Think you can save it?"

"I'll try," Luke replied with a firm nod. 'But are you sure you don't want to?' Luke asked privately. 'You probably have a better chance at succeeding, seeing as you're better with your hyperresonance.'

'Not really, you're the one who's done this before. You go for it. I'll be here in case you don't think you can handle it all.'

'Okay.'

"Alright then Luke, listen carefully." Jade began a series of complex instructions, but with the odd intervention from Asch over their connection, Luke was able to grasp the most of it. He didn't really like it, but it was much better than the alternative. Basically, Jade's plan was to let the land fall on it's own, but to inscribe a glyph that would reactivate the Sephiroth after the land had fallen. Though it wouldn't be able to raise the land again, it would be enough to keep it afloat on the sea of miasma.

Tear watched from afar as Jade spoke with Luke, just softly enough that the others were unable to hear their conversation. Just what did they think they were going to do? With what Van had done, they couldn't do a thing. Did the Colonel figure out some way around it? There certainly wasn't one that she could see.
"Okay Luke, you're up," Asch stated as his twin took a spot in the center of the platform, with the others all safely standing near the wall.

"What are you guys planning?" Tear demanded, suddenly drawing everyone's attention.

"We're going to keep from sinking into the miasma once it falls," Anise provided.

"But how? This passage ring can't be operated. I've been trying to tell you, my brother closed it off! We can't operate the Sephiroth at all."

"Ah but that's where you're wrong," Jade retorted with a sly grin. "Our boys here have a little trick that should get the job done."

"Luke, what are you going to do?" Tear was completely baffled. What kind of trick did the Colonel mean?

"Just watch," Luke replied with a bit of a mischievous grin. The young noble returned his attention to the ceiling. Jade had been right when he said this was going to be harder than before. There were a lot more complex instructions and commands that had to be carved, but he could do it. Luke took a deep breath. Now focus…

It took everything Tear had not to let go of the pedestal in shock when Luke slowly raised his arms and a soft golden glow enveloped him. Was he- but that was impossible! She turned her gaze to the giant glyph on the ceiling where several sets of ancient Ispanian commands were being forcefully carved. Nothing short of a hyperressonance could do that… but- but how?

Tear heard Anise snickering from the other side of the room. Suddenly she realized her mouth was hanging open and she was leaning so far in that she was ready to topple right over the pedestal. The melodist looked over towards Asch, obviously the others had known about this, but what about him? Jade had implied both of them earlier. Could he do this as well?

The redhead was standing with his arms crossed over his chest; all traces of his prior amusement were completely gone. He solemn look continually shifted from the job Luke was doing, to Luke himself, then to Tear, and back to the glyph on the ceiling. One more person that knows. Though he knew that Tear was bound to find out eventually, the thought still made him uneasy. Not that he couldn't trust Tear… but then again, who was to say who he could trust and who he couldn't. Someone had told Mohs where to find them, and while he didn't actually think it was one of them, after what had happened with Guy, Asch just didn't know who he could believe in anymore.

After an achingly long moment of tense silence, Luke finally let out a deep breath and allowed the excess Seventh fonons to dissipate. "How's that Jade?"


"Then is it okay if I let go over here?" Tear inquired. She was starting to see why Asch had passed out; the passage ring was really starting to sap her strength. "We should probably get going if we plan to help with St. Binah's evacuation."

"No, wait," Asch interrupted stepping in to take a closer look. "We have a much bigger problem than St. Binah."

"Why? What is it? What's the matter?" Mieu bounced several times but was unable to draw anyone's attention away from the lights on the ceiling, so he returned to his perch on Tokunaga.
"Yeah, what's up?" Anise inquired.

"This Sephiroth doesn't just support St. Binah, but all of the Rugnica plains," Asch replied.

"But doesn't that put Engeve in danger as well?" Natalia stepped forward and joined everyone else.

"If Engeve is going to fall then we'll have to hurry and evacuate them as well," Ion spoke up.

"You're right," Luke agreed. "We can't let them die either!"

"How much time do you think we have before the land falls?" Asch inquired.

"I don't know for certain, but I doubt we have very much," Jade replied. "A week, two at best."

"That's going to be pushing it, even with the Albiore," the young noble contemplated.

"But what about Noelle?" Jade pointed out. "She's already busy helping with St. Binah. She may be talented, but I doubt she can be in two places at once."

"Then we'll have to detour to Sheridan and hope that the first Albiore is done with repairs," Asch decided. "Didn't Noelle say they had gotten the transmitters working?"

"Yeah, she said that they were almost done with repairs," Luke provided. "But couldn't we just ask Ginji to meet us?"

"That's a good idea," Jade agreed. "It would save us a great deal of time, time that we don't have to begin with."

"Sorry Tear," Asch apologized. "You can let go now."

"Thank you," Tear removed her hands from the pedestal and stepped away allowing it to slam shut and the glyph above them to fade. Without its glow the room seemed unusually dark. Tear stumbled and was caught by the eldest redhead who offered her his hand.

"Are you alright?" Asch asked concernedly.

"I'm fine, just a bit tired, that's all."

"You did better than me," Asch said with a chuckle. Tear looked him in the eye. He and Luke really were alike; their eyes both had that same mysterious light in them. "But do you think you'll be okay to move?" Tear shook her head as his inquiry brought her back to reality.

"I'll be fine." Tear smiled, punctuating her point by straightening her posture and dismissing Asch's support.

"Good, because the old man is right, we haven't got time to waste."

"I know," Tear agreed. "Come on Luke," the melodist called to the redhead who was the only one who had yet to begin towards the exit. "Don't worry, we're going to save them."

Luke looked up at her, and only now did she see how broken up he was. His emerald eyes were shining in the soft light of the dancing glyphs, and his tightly clenched fists were trembling. Tear came over and placed a hand comfortingly on his shoulder.

"But it still won't be the same."
"What do you mean?" Tear asked softly.

"Yeah, maybe we can save them, but they're all still going to lose their homes, their town. We've been there Tear! All those places, they're all going to be gone!"

"Luke, you've already saved those places. You made sure that they won't be destroyed by the miasma. You should be proud of that."

"I just wish there was more we could do."

"For now, we've done all we can. The only thing left is to make sure everyone is evacuated before the land falls."

"I know you're right," Luke said softly. "But still…"

"Then we're going to find a way to stop my brother, and to restore the lands that are in the Qliphoth, but if we want to do that, then we have to act now. There isn't any time left for regret."

Tear was right. Luke shook his head violently trying to shake off the fear and the doubt that still clung to him. He wouldn't do anyone any good here, and for all that Luke felt like he was drowning, he knew he didn't have time to give to such petty feelings as regret and feeling sorry for himself. There would be times later, once Master Van had been stopped, to properly mourn the people lost in Akzeriuth, the sunsets, the mountains, the wonders that had all been devoured by his foolish mistakes and a sea of poison. Any time spent now would be paid for in lives, because there was so precious little of it anymore.

Things had been set in motion, and there would be no stopping them.
The sudden sound of swords clashing made Anise's heart skip a beat and sent her scrambling to her feet from where she had been sitting in the lush green field. How did an enemy get that close without anyone even noticing?! The raven haired Fon Master Guardian spun around, her adrenaline pumping, ready for a fight; but no sooner had she laid eyes on the source, she let out a frustrated sigh and sat back down. Those two were at it again.

Anise lay back in the grass staring at the blue sky and cotton white clouds above her, the sound of metal on metal continuing in the background. Everyone else was just sitting around waiting for Noelle to come pick them up. Their perky pilot said she'd pass by after each round of evacuees to see if they were done with the passage ring. Until she passed by again, there wasn't really much of anything they could do but wait. So that's what they did, well, except for a certain pair redheads who seemed to have found something better to do with their time.

What was with those two lately? It wasn't like she really minded the sparring or anything, but it wasn't the first time they'd practically given her a heart attack in doing it. And it wasn't just sparring either, maybe it was just her but it seemed like they were getting more and more spontaneous lately. Then again, spontaneous wasn't really the right word, they just... did stuff, without ever seeming to talk about it. Like this sparring, neither had said a word, they just starting going at it. Did they just attack each other at random or something? Maybe she was looking into this too much. Anise made a mental note to ask Ion if he had noticed anything, she was probably just imagining things. But in the meantime, at least it was something interesting to watch.

Luke's sword came down but was cleanly met by his sibling's, who wasted no time in retaliating. The younger brother was forced back but quickly regained his initiative and temporarily took control of the scuffle. Asch's blocks became less fluent, and he found himself caught off guard by Luke's offensive. Noticing Asch was starting to have trouble keeping up, Luke attempted to increase the frequency of his attacks. But by picking up his pace, he left himself open, something the eldest redhead quickly took advantage of, and Luke found himself on the defensive again.

Damn it Asch was good! Luke struggled as his brother took control of the scuffle, carefully watching each strike. Other than their recent bouts, it had been awhile since either of them had sparred for any length of time. Sadly, it didn't seem like he had managed to gain any sort of advantage over his older brother in that time. Still... there had to be someway to get the advantage back! But Asch's defence was next to flawless, especially when he had control of the fight, and Luke couldn't find an opening. Luke continued to block, slowly being forced back by his sibling's offensive. Asch was far more refined in his swordsmanship than he was. Then again, Asch did have almost six years of a head start.

Luke was doing well, but it was likely that their bout wouldn't last much longer. Asch quickly noticed that he was starting to get tired, meaning Luke was probably starting to push his limits. His sibling's stamina had drastically increased since the start of their journey, but the two of them still weren't quite on equal ground.

Before Asch knew what happened, Luke pulled off a feint and broke through the redhead's defence, forcing him back. Wasting no time, Asch spun around, drawing the other blade at his side and sending Luke's sword skidding across the dirt.

"Hey! That's cheating!" Luke whined, all the while glaring at the Jewel of Gardios that dangled from Asch's other hand. His brother's own sword still sat against his throat, proclaiming the elder sibling's victory.
"Everything and anything is fair if you're fighting for your life," Asch shot back. He sheathed both blades and offered Luke a hand. "You're getting a lot better. You don't hesitate as much anymore."

"Thanks," Luke replied, accepting Asch's help in getting back up. "You too, I mean, you caught me off guard more than once."

"Good to know," Asch answered with a mischievous grin.

"Hey!"

"As nice as it is to see you two staying in top shape, is there any particular reason you've been so eager to practice lately?" Jade inquired once Luke had retrieved his sword and both boys had sat down with the rest of the group.

"Yeah," Anise spoke up. "On the way to Shurrey Hill, last night and again this morning, what's with all the sparring?"


"Oh? And all the monsters we've fought don't count?" Jade taunted.

"It's not the same as fighting a person who can gauge your strategy and adjust to compensate," Asch retaliated. "All things considered, we've been really lucky as far as the God-Generals are concerned. Legretta retreated on her own, as did Sync and Largo, and we managed to catch Arietta in a situation where she couldn't fight back. When you think about it, we have yet to seriously fight any of them. If we keep up what we're doing, it's only a matter of time before we'll have to face them."

"Fair enough," Jade replied simply.

"I noticed you've managed to get that Fon Slot seal figured out," Asch commented.

"Really?" Luke piped up.

"That's very observant of you," Jade replied.

"That's good to hear, Colonel." Tear smiled.

"Yes," Ion agreed. "Especially since it was partially my fault it happened in the first place."

"Well, it was only matter of time to begin with," Jade shrugged. "Fon slot seals aren't meant to last indefinitely. They were designed to restrain a strong fonist long enough for them to be killed."

"Man, when is Noelle going to get here?" Anise whined, breaking the tense silence Jade's comment had created.

"My, my," Jade pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose, an evil gleam sparkling in his eye. "You're the last person I expected to be anxious to get up in the air."

"Shut up, Colonel!"

"Don't be so embarrassed," Jade continued his taunting. "Why, you're the first person in all of Auldrant to be afraid of flying. You should be proud."

"I am not afraid of flying!"
"Oh? So then you'd be okay if we cra-"

"Shut up! I hate you, Colonel," Anise pouted.

"Well if that's the case, she won't be hiding it much longer," Asch commented, suppressing his own chuckles as he pointed out a small object in the western skies. "There she is."

"I wonder how everything is going," Natalia wondered. Asch placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"We'll find out soon enough."

"So Noelle, how's the evacuation of St. Binah coming along?" Asch inquired as soon as the blonde pilot had them safely in the air.

"Not so well, I'm afraid," she replied, keeping her eyes fixed on the air ahead of them.

"Why, what's the matter?"

Noelle simply nodded towards the mountain range on their left. "You'll see," she stated solemnly, still refusing to look away from the air ahead of them. What had her guard up? Everyone shuffled over to the windows on the left side to try and get a decent view. Did a storm come up? No, something like that would be visible from here. Just what was impeding the evacuation? None of them had to wait long for answers; moments later, the last mountain vanished beneath them and their view opened up onto the Rugnica plains.

There wasn't one passenger on the Albiore whose heart didn't drop into their stomach.

The Rugnica Plains were enveloped in war.

Seas of blue and red crashed sending waves of blood and bodies scattering across what was once an endless green sea of fields and forests. Land ships were scattered among the forces, their cannons launching massive fonic artes. The explosions left in their wake sent smoke, flames and debris so high, even the Albiore had to be wary of them.

This was… this was terrible! Luke felt like someone had dropped a boulder into the pit of his stomach. Everywhere he looked, people were dying. Blood stained the once pristine meadows, bodies littered the field like embers in a dying fire; and once again Luke found himself surrounded by death, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Asch saw Luke look away, turning from the grim sight before them. He couldn't blame his younger sibling; he was ready to look away himself. It was almost more than he could bear. And after they had tried so hard! He had known at the back of his mind that the war could still break out, but somewhere deep down, he had actually believed they could still make it in time.

"Damn it!" Asch's fist pounded against the window.

"H-How?" Natalia's hand was trembling as her fingers lay gently against the glass. "How did this happen?"

"It was inevitable," Jade said, his voice stone cold. "Though we did stop in Baticul, we didn't
succeed in speaking to the King. Like Asch said, it was Duke Fabre against the remainder of the court, I'm afraid it was a hopeless venture to begin with."

"But this is terrible!" Natalia continued. "All those soldiers are down there; Asch, that land is going to fall!"

"I know!" Asch gave the window one last frustrated pound. "Noelle, what's the situation in St. Binah?"

"Most of the citizens have been evacuated to Grand Chokmah. We've been bringing them to the Theor Forest where the military has arranged to have them brought into the city."

"That's quite the risk his Majesty is running," Jade commented. "Normally in war time, Grand Chokmah is completely closed off. It becomes an impenetrable fortress."

"There are only a handful of people and the soldiers left there now," Noelle replied. "From what I've been told, Grand Chokmah will be closing off the entrance once the last of them arrive."

"So what's the problem?" Asch inquired.

"It seems the Kimlascan army figured out that the defences in the St. Binah area are weaker, so they're trying to gain ground in that region. The entire city is under siege. The people in St. Binah have enough supplies to last them awhile, and from the looks of things they're fine in terms of defence, but the only way they're getting out is if they board the Albiore."

"So without any of them going by land, how many more trips do you think it'll take to get everyone out?"

"At least two, maybe three or four."

"Noelle, can you send a message to Sheridan with the transmitter?" Asch requested.

"It's no good, I tried earlier; I can't get it to work."

"It's likely due to interference from the battle in this area," Jade commented.

"What do you think Jade?" Asch pondered. "Do you think there's enough time to get everyone out of St. Binah before the land or their defences fall?"

"St. Binah's defences are nothing to laugh at; I don't doubt that they can hold, even given the limited number of people they have to hold them. I think our primary concern is the land falling. I can't be certain but there should be enough time, especially given the fact Noelle doesn't have to pass by to pick us up. That being said, I believe it is imperative that we get those remaining citizens evacuated as soon as possible."

"But what about everyone else?" Natalia asked, her voice still laced with panic, betraying how shaken she was by what was going on below them.

"Yeah," Luke agreed. "What about the people of Engeve? We have to evacuate them too! And we need to find somewhere to bring them if Grand Chokmah is going to be closed off."

"Engeve? What about all those soldiers?" Natalia's protests were directed at the younger redhead. "We need to head to Baticul right away to stop the war!"

"There's no guaranty that we can stop the war in time, even if we do go to Baticul," Luke stood his
ground. "We should start with evacuating the people we know we can save, and then we can work on getting the soldiers out of the way."

"There are a lot more soldiers on this field than there are people in Engeve!"

"But even if we could somehow get all the way to Baticul, stop the war and get the soldiers to retreat, what about all the Malkuth soldiers? We leave them to die?!" Luke's voice was steadily climbing alongside Natalia's.

"Emperor Peony doesn't want war. If Kimlasca retreats then so will Malkuth! Then everyone is saved!" Natalia retaliated.

"Except the people of Engeve! They're the ones in the most danger right now!"

"A few hundred farmers are hardly worth the lives of over half the Kimlascan and Malkuth armies!"

Everyone else in the Albiore had fallen silent in the wake of the nobles' quarrel. It was astounding, none of them, Asch included, had ever seen the two of them fight like that before. Though it wasn't unusual to see Natalia that passionate about something, it was the fact that Luke refused to back down that had allowed the fight to escalate to new heights. No one was quite sure how to interject; both of them had very valid points after all.

"It's never going to happen in time!" Luke yelled. "Engeve is a huge source of food for well over half the world. You think it won't be a target of the military as it is? Especially once St. Binah is taken; it'll be Kimlasca's next target! It's not like St. Binah; they don't have walls or soldiers to defend them. If the Kimlascan front gets that far, there won't be anything we can do! We need to get everyone out of there while we still can!"

"If we stop the war, that will no longer be of any concern now will it?" The young princess shot back, her patience with her fiancée's replica growing thinner every second. Just who did he think he was, sentencing thousands of his own countrymen to death?

"The people of Engeve can't defend themselves like the soldiers can," Luke replied, his voice possessing an edge of venom to it. "Weren't you the one who told me to make priorities?!"

Natalia fell silent but her hateful stare didn't subside. This was clearly a different situation! They had to help as many people as possible, and the best way to do that was to stop the war. It was so obvious, even a child could see it! It didn't matter; Asch knew it was the best course of action. He was the heir to the throne; he would never abandon his country, not when it needed him so desperately. Luke would simply have no choice but to follow their lead.

"So where are we heading?" Noelle finally asked, being the first to dare break the silence that had filled the Albiore.

"Can you drop us off in Sheridan?" Asch said quietly, his gaze never leaving his brother and his fiancée. "After that, we'll get you to go finish evacuating St. Binah."

"Sure thing, General Frings and that McGovern fellow have things pretty organized. I don't expect there should be any problems," Noelle replied.

"Good," Asch said with a nod.

"So what about us?" Anise asked. "What are we going to do?"
"We're going to pick up the first Albiore, and then we're going to evacuate Engeve."

"What?" Natalia demanded when the answer she had been expected didn't come.

"I'm sorry Natalia, but Luke is right. The people in Engeve are in a lot more danger right now. Even if we went to Baticul, things like this are complicated; you know that. It would take awhile to get worked out, and even longer to get the soldiers to retreat. We need to save those we can right now, and once we do, then we can see about ending the war."

Natalia's fists trembled but she said nothing. This was complete and utter nonsense. Everything was wrong, but why was Asch so intent on making it worse?! It was all Luke's fault. Asch had been doting on his so-called sibling ever since Akzeriuth. Sure maybe Luke hadn't been entirely at fault, but he still bore some responsibility for his actions. Their reactions and attitudes towards Luke hadn't been that out of line; certainly not enough to merit this kind of babying. Didn't Asch see how much he was sacrificing just to make his brother happy? She could handle Luke's new found attitude, she could take being proven wrong, and she could deal with Asch doting on Luke; but to the point of sacrificing lives? When the path they needed to take was clearly laid out in front of them? Maybe what she'd been told wasn't so far off after all. This was going too far, and things were quickly getting out of hand.

Enough was enough.

Priorities…

Asch sighed and continued to fiddle with his small golden trinket as he pondered all possible meanings of the word. Luke had put emphasis on it, and whatever he meant, it made Natalia fall silent pretty fast, not to mention ticked her right off. Though he highly doubted he had helped that situation much by siding with Luke, even if it had been the same course of action he had been planning. There was no way around it; it just wasn't possible to stop a war in the time they had to work with. No matter how much Asch hated it, all they could do was get the people of Engeve out of the line of fire. But for some reason, Natalia refused to listen to any of the reasons they had offered. The livid young princess had long since stormed off to one of the cabins, and would probably stay there until they reached Sheridan. He wanted to go talk to her, but before he did, he wanted to know what he was talking to her about.

"Thinking about something?" Tear's voice broke him out of his train of thought. The melodist was seated across from him and her gentle blue eyes held a hint of worry at the redhead's troubled state. It wasn't until she had spoken that Asch realized she was the only one left in the seating area behind the cockpit.

"Yeah, priorities," Asch replied, still subconsciously fiddling with his trinket. His eyes followed the shine of the metal as it bounced around, ironically reflective of his current state of mind.

"What sort of priorities? Are you worried about having disagreed with Natalia? If it's any consolation, I think you made the right decision."

"No, the word 'priorities'," Asch corrected the melodist. "The way Luke said it, and the way Natalia got mad. I can't figure out what he meant, or why it would have upset her like that."

"I see," Tear's reply made Asch look up. The melodist was no longer looking his way but was instead staring out the window.
"Do you know what he meant?"

"I might know why it upset Natalia, but I can't be sure. I wasn't there either," Tear finally admitted.

"What do you think it might be?" Asch inquired.

"I can't say."

"What? Why not?"

"Because Luke made me promise not to tell you," Tear said rather hesitantly. She obviously didn't want to reveal the reason for not answering, but apparently couldn't come up with any sort of believable explanation. Tear never was good with excuses.

Asch eyed the melodist, but it was easy to tell that she had no intention of breaking her promise to his little brother. But why didn't Luke want him to know? What was going on behind his back, or better yet, why did Luke feel he could confide in Tear but not in him?

"Why don't you go ask Luke yourself?" The melodist suggested when she saw how upset Asch had become. "I'm sure he'd tell you if you asked him about it."

"He's sleeping in one of the cabins," Asch replied.

As much as he wanted answers, Asch didn't have it in him to wake his little brother up. Luke's lack of sleep lately hadn't gone unnoticed, but no matter how many times Asch asked him about it, he refused to admit anything was wrong. And yet, it was obvious something was amiss. What else was Luke keeping from him?

Asch let out a sigh and returned to his pondering. Tear watched him as he gazed out the window and into the horizon. They had finally gotten away from the battlefield, but it was something that still weighed heavily on everyone's minds. So many people hung in the balance and it seemed unlikely they could save them all. But somehow, Tear had a sneaking suspicion that wasn't what had Asch so worried, if only from the broken locket he rolled between his fingers.

"Why don't I go get Luke and you can talk with him. You're never going to get anywhere thinking in circles like that," Tear said after a moment.

"No, let him sleep," Asch interjected when the melodist motioned to get up. "He probably needs it. He hasn't really been sleeping very well lately, so let him get some now. We may not have time for it later."

"I suppose you're right," Tear sat back down. "I wonder why he's been having trouble sleeping."

"He hasn't said anything to you?"

"No, nothing." Asch let out a silent sigh of relief at the melodist's reply. So maybe it wasn't just him. But what reason did Luke have to be hiding things? Tear didn't seem to be quite as concerned as he was; maybe he was just blowing things way out of proportion. After all, Luke trusted him… right? "I wonder how long it's been going on," Tear wondered.

"Of course," Asch could have kicked himself for not noticing sooner.

"What? What is it?"

"It's been since around the time Akzeriuth fell," Asch replied.
"You think it has to do with Akzeriuth?"

"It wouldn't surprise me; Luke isn't the kind of person who could get over something like that very easily."

"Are sure it's about Akzeriuth? I mean he's changed a lot since then," Tear commented, her voice becoming quiet.

Tear had a very valid point, Luke had come a long way since then, and if his fight with Natalia had been any indication, he had become a lot stronger. He was determined, desperate even, to save as many lives as he could, and Asch was worried to the extents to which that may drive him, or break him.

"It doesn't matter, he's still Luke," Asch finally answered. Maybe he had changed, maybe he hadn't, but Luke still had the same stubborn tendency to put everyone's happiness before his own. If it really was something related to Akzeriuth that was bothering him, he'd be keeping it to himself. But why wouldn't he even talk about it with his own family?

"I guess you're right," Tear admitted. "But try not to worry so much."

That was easy for her to say.

Sheridan was much of what he expected, with none of what he'd hoped for. Guy sighed as he aimlessly wandered the city's streets, hoping beyond all hope that he'd catch a glimpse of red hair, a flash of Jade's blue uniform, the sound of Natalia lecturing Luke in the distance, hell, he'd even settle for one of Anise's bear hugs at this point. Guy shuddered at the thought. He took it back. He didn't need to find them that badly.

Then again, just how badly did he want to find them? Guy wasn't too sure of that answer himself. It was highly unlikely that they wanted to see him; of that much Guy was sure. He may not know exactly what they had overheard, but to have them flat out abandon him like that… they had certainly heard enough. He'd be lucky if they didn't attack him where he stood, forget even talking. Guy could see the look in Asch's eyes already, and just the thought sent chills down his spine. They had every reason to deem him a threat; he couldn't honestly say he'd feel any different if he was in their position. Still, he wanted to talk to them, if nothing else, they deserved a reason.

But whether he wanted it or not, Luke, Asch and everyone else were nowhere to be found. The hangar where the Albiore was kept had been closed and locked, though whether it was empty, or because lemon and the others had been given a heads up about him, he couldn't be sure. Either way, it told him nothing. Not surprising really, given what was going on with the war and all. Sheridan was the probably the last place they'd be; but he knew they had planned to come back for Ginji once repairs were done on the Albiore, so he thought he might have had a chance to catch up with them. No luck, that window seemed to have already closed. Maybe he'd have better luck in Grand Chokmah, or perhaps in Baticul, even if Guy doubted the safety of the latter option.

A sudden movement just to his left drew the blonde's undivided attention. Who was it this time? These people were starting to try even his seemingly limitless patience. But there was one way to put an end to this once and for all.

Guy spun around suddenly, surprising the figure he had identified. A rather startled middle aged woman staggered back a few steps and dropped the basket she had been carrying.
"I'm sorry," Guy apologized, motioning to help her recover her possessions, embarrassed at his careless assumption. But before he could intervene, the woman had collected all her belongings.

"It's no trouble," the lady said with a smile before continuing on her way.

At least it wasn't another one… Guy let out a sigh; seriously, he'd never had so many stalkers in his life, at least five since he'd arrived in Sheridan alone. Some wore cloaks, others didn't, and they varied in age from a young boy to an elderly lady, but they would all follow him in spite of his best attempts to shake them off. Guy couldn't get any information out of them either, not since he had caught Noir in Daath. What business did the Dark Wings have with him? Oh well, he wasn't getting anywhere just standing around, he might as well find somewhere to stay the night before it got too late.

There were a lot of things Guy had been looking for when he came to Sheridan. But it was on the street leading up to the inn that Guy found himself staring into a pair of very familiar blue eyes. This was the one thing he hadn't been expecting to find.

"Hello, Gailardia."

"…Vandesdelca."

Luke brought his hand up to cover the yawn he let out. Despite his extended nap aboard the Albiore, he still felt rather tired. His sleep was still fogged by nightmares, and it seemed like no matter what he did, they just wouldn't leave him alone. Perhaps that was his punishment for what he had done.

"All that sparring must have worn you out, huh?" Anise commented, noticing how he was dragging his feet.

"Yeah, I guess so," Luke answered with a chuckle. The redhead eyed Jade, and was grateful when the Colonel decided not to pry. It was a bad lie, and even he knew it.

"Do you think Noelle will be alright?" Tear asked as everyone made their way through the streets of Sheridan. Though it was only about mid-day, there weren't many people out and about, maybe because of the clouds that hung overhead and their threats of rain. But whatever the reason, at least it made the normally bustling city easier to navigate. Hopefully they could catch up with Ginji soon.

"I'm sure she'll be okay," Asch replied. "She did just fine on her own before, I don't see why she'd have trouble now, as long as she's careful while flying over the battlefield."

"I doubt there's much to be concerned about," Jade stated with a shrug. "The battle will likely die down to some extent once night falls. The explosions will be easier to spot in the dark as well. She's safer now than she was while carrying us."

"I'm still somewhat concerned for her safety," Ion commented.

"Well it's not like there's much we can do from here," Anise pointed out the obvious.

"Shhht," Asch harshly hushed everyone and quickly signalled them to take cover behind a nearby building.
"What? What is it?" Mieu bounced. Pre-empting his older brother, Luke grabbed the little creature by the head mid-bounce and forcefully replaced him on the ground. Taking the hint, the little cheagle fell silent. But what had Asch spotted all of a sudden?

"You won't reconsider?" A very familiar voice was carried on the cold breeze. It was Master Van! A feeling of apprehension washed over the man's younger student, a feeling Luke was becoming far too familiar with lately. What was Master Van doing here? Was he trying to make Sheridan fall too? But they had already stabilized the Passage Ring in this area so he couldn't do anything, right? Was he there to stop them from saving the people of Engeve? But how would he know they were here? Luke's head began spinning with an endless tirade of questions that served no purpose but to spur on his already racing heart. His growing anxiety must have been showing, for Tear placed a comforting hand on Luke's shoulder and gave him a gentle smile. Luke took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down.

Master Van didn't have any way of knowing they would come to Sheridan, so he must be here for some other reason. But who was he talking to? The young noble peeked further around the corner into the virtually empty city street. Luke's heart sank when he saw the second person, for standing in front of his former teacher, was Guy.

Damn it! Why here of all places? Asch cursed to himself as he clutched the second sword at his side. They didn't have time for this! Engeve could fall any day now; they couldn't afford to get caught up in a mess with Van and Guy! Neither of them seemed to have noticed the groups' presence; with any luck things would stay that way, and they may learn a thing or two about what Van's plans were.

"I'm sorry," Guy's response halted everyone's thoughts and drew their undivided attention to the two men in the street. "Even if you do revive Hod, all those people are still gone. No matter what you do, they won't come back. I just can't agree with what you're doing."

"You'll still side with them, even though they abandoned you?"

"It's not just for them," the blonde finally said. "They share the same beliefs that I do, and they want the same things for this world. So even if Luke and Asch abandoned me, even if they think I'm a murderous spy and are willing to attack me on the spot, I will still defend them."

"They killed your family," Van pointed out, the look on his face growing dark.

"No," Guy shook his head. "Their father killed my family. It's not the same thing."

"But you wanted revenge all the same. Didn't you want to hurt him like you'd been hurt? Show him the suffering he inflicted on you and all the other families of Hod?"

"Not if it means hurting Luke or Asch. I won't make them suffer; they have nothing to do with this."

"You're being rather noble to a family of murderers."

"It was a war," Guy pointed out.

"The slaughtering was needless none-the-less," Van retaliated.

"It doesn't matter anymore; it was a long time ago. I may not like it, and I don't have to accept it, but getting revenge now isn't going to solve a thing!"

"Why doesn't it matter? Because the Score said it would happen? Because the Score said that Hod
would fall? Or is it simply because not a soul on this planet did a thing about it?" Van's voice was rising, a rare occurrence in itself for the man who normally had perfect control of any situation he found himself in.

Guy watched his former comrade with mixed emotions: sadness for the person his friend had become, anger at the world that had driven him to these lengths, and hatred, for the people that had taken away his innocence. Yet, beyond all that, Guy nurtured a small feeling of hope, hope that the once bright young boy could be made to understand, to turn away from the destructive path he was on. But the more Van spoke, the more that small flame was smothered.

"Gailardia… we wanted the same things once. Won't you consider joining me? Together we can right the wrongs of your past, right all the wrongs the Score has written for this world. We swore to help each other out, why do you hesitate now?"

"When we last left Baticul, you had promised me you would protect Luke in Akzeriuth; but you left him to die in the passage ring. So tell me, why should I believe you now?"

"It couldn't be helped," Van offered a bit too quickly for Guy's peace of mind. "The boy didn't trust me, he wouldn't come."

"Can you blame him after what you pulled?" Now it was Guy's voice that was beginning to rise. "I'd be worried if he still did trust you after a stunt like that; and it sure as hell didn't stop you from saving Asch!"

"I couldn't have both of them die. Try to understand Gailardia; this is for the greater good, for the freedom of the world. There are bound to be sacrifices along the way."

"Then what's to say I won't become one of those 'sacrifices'?"

"I pledged my sword to your service, to be your protector and to give my life for yours should that day ever come," Van replied. "A lot has happened since then, but I still hold to those words. I will not see you die if there is something I can do. Right now, the best I can do is to have you alongside me, where I can ensure your safety and your happiness."

Guy let out a heavy sigh. "Then as your master, I ask you to stop this foolishness. If you can't do that, then I will return your sword to you."

"That I cannot do," Van said sternly.

"Then I return your sword to you Vandesdelca."

"You always were foolish," Van said coldly, his voice betraying his disappointment. "Your greatest mistake is choosing to stand by an old enemy rather than an old friend."

"No," Guy retorted, "my only mistake was ever deluding myself into believing Asch was my enemy."

"Should you choose to stand against me the next time we meet, I won't show you any mercy." And with those final words, Van turned around and walked away.

"Farewell Vandesdelca," Guy said softly as he watched the man who had been his closest childhood friend vanish into the grey horizon.

"Well now what?" Guy wondered aloud, still staring down the street where Van had vanished. Given the clouds overhead, it was hard to estimate the time. It must be getting closer to super by
now. Guy's stomach rumbled at the thought. He could use a good meal and then he would just have to resume his search. Maybe he would have better luck in Baticul. Given the current war and the fact that it was unlikely Natalia had changed that much in the past few weeks, it was a safe bet they'd be going there eventually.

With renewed resolve, Guy turned around to make his way back to the inn, but instead, he found himself face to face with a shadow from his not-so-distant past.


But before Guy could even get his question out, he found himself staring down the blade of a sword he had seen all too often in his dreams these days. But what in all of Auldrant was it doing here, and why did Asch of all people have it?

'Asch?! What are you doing?!' Luke demanded, infuriated by his brother's harsh actions. Asch had heard the things Guy had said, just like the rest of them. What the hell was he thinking?

'Shut up Luke!' Asch cut off all his sibling's protests with a single sharp command. He didn't budge an inch, and the Jewel of Gardios remained pointed at the blonde. Luke may not like it, but this was necessary.

It was his father's sword. The heirloom of his family that he was supposed to inherit when he came of age and took over the household; a precious treasure that was stolen as a trophy along with his father's head in proclamation of the loss of all he had ever held dear. Guy's clenched fists turned white and it took every drop of the will power he'd built up over the years not to react any further. This was too much. Maybe he had made some mistakes, maybe he did deserve their hatred, but to point his own family sword at him? And in the hands of the son of the man who had killed his family? It was just-

"Guy..." Luke hesitantly began, but was cut off by a sharp gesture from his older brother. Damn it Asch! Luke bored holes in the back of his brother's skull. What was he trying to do? Was this all supposed to be some sort of stupid excuse to finally have at it with Guy?

The blonde eyed his best friend; maybe former best friend, Guy silently reminded himself. Luke seemed willing to talk, but Luke wasn't the one he would have to contend with. Asch wasn't the only one giving him hateful stares. But still, as long as there was that small chance they would listen, maybe it would be worth the effort. None-the-less, as Guy stared down the length of his family's last remaining treasure, he couldn't help but wonder.

Was Asch really his enemy now that he knew the truth?

"I suppose you want an explanation, huh?" Guy managed to choke out. No one dared say a word, but the two emerald daggers before him were enough of an answer for him to find the motivation to continue.

"Van and I have been friends since we were kids," the blonde explained. "We both used to live in Hod along with Cantabile. Van's family technically served mine, but I was the one who looked up to him. Of course, everything changed when the war started. Duke Fabre led the attack, and was the one who killed my family. For a long time, all I could think about was revenge. I wanted to hurt the people who had hurt me; I wanted revenge on your father for what he did to my family. I had planned to kill both of you, to make him go through what I had. Van and I swore to help each other as much as we could, as two survivors of Hod, and as two friends looking out for each other." Guy paused, but the sword Asch was holding didn't budge, so the blonde continued his tale.
"To be perfectly honest, I knew about Akzeriuth, Van had told me long before it happened. I didn't know the details, but I knew what the Score said. But when the time finally came, I started doubting what I wanted to do. I wanted my revenge, but I didn't want to see Luke get hurt. I had tried so hard not to get close to either of you, but I guess I failed," Guy said, his last comment directed solely at his best friend.

"So Van promised me he would make sure that Asch was the sent to Akzeriuth in Luke's place." Guy could almost feel Asch tense up as soon as the line escaped his mouth, and given who was holding the sword, he wondered if it had been a smart idea to say it at all. But if he was going to come clean, he may as well give them the whole truth. "Of course, we all know what really happened. Believe me, I was pissed to high hell with him all the way to Akzeriuth. But I swear, I had no idea what he was planning. I didn't realize that Akzeriuth's destruction was going to be his doing. It's not an excuse, I know it isn't; Akzeriuth is just as much my fault as it is Van's because I wasn't able to stop him. If you don't believe anything else I say, believe that."

That was it; Guy's shoulder's sagged, clearly indicating that he was done. He had nothing else to tell, that was the whole truth; that was how he felt. Now there was nothing left but to wait for Asch to run him through with that sword he was holding.

But much to the former servant's surprise, when the Jewel of Gardios finally moved, it wasn't towards him. Asch withdrew the blade from the blonde's face and flipped it around, skilfully catching the blade without cutting his fingers. Guy could only stare in amazement at the hilt of the sword that was clearly being offered to him.

"What on- After all that… why?" Guy finally managed, accepting the sword from Asch.

Asch remained silent.

"It's because he's going to trust you," Luke provided with a smile, finally understanding Asch's intentions.

"Even though I was going to kill you? Even though I tried to arrange for you to die in Akzeriuth?" Guy still couldn't believe what was happening, this couldn't be real… he must be dreaming. The glistening blue jewel, the shining gold hilt it was wrapped in… there was just no way. But the warm metal hilt in his hand along with the feeling of cold raindrops on his face as they slowly began to fall betrayed the reality he found himself in.

"We knew all that stuff already," Anise pitched in. "Père told us all about it when we were in Baticul."

"But wait, if you already knew… then why didn't you…"

"That was rather cunning of you," Jade commented to Asch who chose to ignore it. Even his compliments sounded insulting. "He was testing your reaction," the Colonel explained.

"Jade?" Guy eyed the colonel whose harsh and condemning gaze from just moments earlier had completely vanished.

"A clever plan I must say," the colonel continued as he used his uniform to wipe the raindrops from his glasses. "It was simple; if you had truly been our enemy then you would have reacted as soon as he pointed the sword at you."

"Yeah," Anise agreed, "and you wouldn't have told us all that stuff. You would have lied and tried to make yourself look good."
"You told us the truth," Ion commented. "Even though it put you at a disadvantage and was more likely to earn you our hatred and distrust. That alone is proof of your integrity."

"I-I don't know what to say," Guy managed.

"Say you won't do it again," Luke teased. "Next time we'll have to send Anise after you."

"Gah! Please don't!" The thought alone sent shivers down his spine.

"But seriously," Luke continued, his smile vanishing in place of the solemn expression that washed over his face. "Don't do that again. I really thought…"

"I won't," Guy cut his best friend off. "I swear, I will use this sword to protect the both of you."

Guy nodded to Luke and turned towards Asch who stood alone and still refused to look him in the eye. "Asch… are you okay with this?" He didn't really want to ask, and his question may have just rekindled the proverbial fire, but he'd rather deal with this now than later.

"You were still honest," Asch finally replied. "Even though every word out of your mouth made me want to run you through, you still said it. So I'll trust you… for now." Asch pulled the matching sheath from his belt and held it out, his eyes meeting Guy's for the first time since he had handed over the sword. All the sharpness in Asch's eyes was gone, though Guy could still see a flicker of distrust. But distrust, he could handle. Maybe not right now, but eventually. He would prove to Asch that he meant what he had said, that he wanted to protect them... now more than ever. At the very least it was a start.

Guy smiled and reached out to grab the sheath he was offered, but as soon as he did, Asch's grip tightened.

"But," Asch continued, his intensity reaching an all time high. "If you ever do betray us, next time, I will run you through."

"I wouldn't expect any less," Guy said happily. The redhead let go of the sheathe and allowed him to put his family's -no- his sword away.

"So what's next?" Guy casually inquired. He had no idea why everyone was here in Sheridan or what they had been doing up until this point.

"First I think we should get out of the rain before someone catches a cold," Jade provided as if it had been the most obvious thing in the world. Well, it was comforting to see that he never changed. "Then, provided the weather lets up and it is safe to depart, we will locate Ginji and evacuate Engeve."

"Engeve? What's the matter with Engeve?" Guy asked worriedly.

"Can we save the explanations for once we're inside and dry?" Asch grumbled, upset at being caught out in such terrible weather yet again. He'd had enough rain in Grand Chokmah to last him half a lifetime.

"Umm, I think we may have a problem," Ion hesitantly spoke up.

"What is it?" Tear asked.

"Uh guys…" Anise drew their attention, noticing the problem that Ion was talking about. "Where's Natalia?"
"Natalia!" The blonde's voice was drowned out by the light drizzle that was now falling steadily down on the city of craftsmen. "You know," Guy suddenly realized with a chuckle, "maybe I shouldn't be the one calling for her."

"Maybe," Luke replied. "But I don't think she's all that likely to answer to me either."

"She mad at you again?"

"Oh yeah."

"What happened this time?"

"It's a long story," Luke said with an exasperated sigh.

"Isn't it always?" Guy shrugged, pleased with the faint smile that tugged at his best friend's lips.

"I'm glad you're back, Guy."

"Thanks Luke, that means a lot." Guy really was glad to be back. It wasn't until he had been gone, did he realize just how much he had missed being around everyone. He still couldn't really process everything that had just happened. To be perfectly honest, he was utterly amazed that Asch had been willing to take him back so easily. It was clear as day that any and all trust that may have existed between the two of them before this mess was completely gone, but considering the circumstances, and just how much of a concession it was for the noble, he was grateful. Maybe there was hope for them yet. "I'm glad to be back too."


"I'm sorry Luke, I really am. I didn't mean for everything to happen that way, or for you to find out about me like that. I guess that's what happens when you keep secrets too long; they just sort of come out, and never in the way you want them to."

"I know what you mean," Luke replied remembering all too well how his and Asch's last secret had ended up out in the open. "That God-General, Cantabile… she was your friend right?"

"Yeah, we were pretty close as kids. I haven't seen her since Hod fell."

"And you were both from noble families?"


"Can I ask you something?"

"You've already been asking me things," Guy shot back teasingly, giving his best friend a pointed look.

"If you're a noble from Malkuth, you must have had somewhere else you could have gone," Luke continued undeterred by Guy's taunts. "Why did you come work as a servant in our house?"

"You really want an answer to that?" Guy inquired, his tone making it clear that the answer wasn't something pleasant. Luke nodded. "Honestly, I moved to Kimlasca because I was going to kill
Asch. My status meant nothing to me, it was just an empty title. All I cared about back then was getting revenge."

"I'm kind of jealous," Luke said with a weak smile.

"What?" Guy asked incredulously.

"I mean, I know revenge isn't right and all, but I'm jealous of how easily you gave up everything to follow your goals. I don't think I could do that."

"You'd be surprised what you'd do for the people you care about," Guy answered simply. "Besides, it's different for you; you still have your parents and Asch which is why it seems like it would be so much harder to give it all up. I don't think you'd have any problems following your dreams, you're stronger than you give yourself credit for."

"Thanks Guy," Luke smiled. He'd forgotten how good Guy was at saying just the right thing to make him feel better. Then a thought crossed his mind. "Do you… I mean, you don't…"

"I don't want to kill Asch anymore," Guy provided easily guessing what had Luke so worried all of a sudden. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't resent what your father did, but I know that hurting you two won't solve a thing. Back then, all I really thought about was hurting your father as badly as I could, and Asch was an easy target. Maybe you could say I just didn't have the guts to go after your father, so I took it out on Asch."

"Is that why you two never got along?"

"Yeah… Asch has more than enough reason to hate me. I was pretty terrible to him before you came along. Of course, you know Asch, he isn't one to just take it, and I'm sure you can guess how things went from there. But I can honestly say that I was the one who started everything. Then… then I helped Van kidnap him." Guy fell silent and waited for Luke's reaction.


"Yeah? That's it?" Guy had expected a lot of different reactions from Luke at his latest revelation, but that certainly hadn't been one of them.

"I know, Asch told me."

"You knew? For how long?"

"Does it matter?"

"Then why did you trust me?"

"Well, it's like you said," Luke shrugged, "things are different now, right?"

"Yeah but…"


"Shall we go find Natalia? Before Asch rakes us over?"

"Yeah, and when I find her, I'm going to give her an earful."

"Really?" Guy just couldn't picture Luke yelling at Natalia. It was usually the other way around.
"Yes. Asch has enough to worry about without having her taking off like that." Luke was determined, and there was a strength in his best friend that Guy hadn't seen before.

Just what had happened while he was gone?

Asch stood alone on the road leading up to the inn. Everyone had finally vanished in the distance, breaking into pairs to try and track down his errant fiancée. He had volunteered to search the places he thought she might go on his own, while everyone else covered the city. They knew she had been with them when they got to Sheridan, but no one had noticed when she slipped away. But why would she just take off like that without telling anyone? It wasn't like her at all. She wasn't that mad, was she?

No matter how mad she might be, Asch knew Natalia had more sense then to try and head back to Baticul on her own, especially with the world's current state of affairs. At least, that's what he wanted to believe. To be perfectly honest, he didn't really know what to think anymore; she hadn't been at all like herself for quite some time now. Everything was such a mess, it was getting to the point that he didn't even know where to start anymore. So much to deal with, no time to do it in, and without any of the information that he needed… Asch let out a frustrated sigh. If he got out of this one with all of his sanity intact he'd be highly surprised.

"Hey there, honey."

Asch could feel the pressure of the pink-haired bandit's shoulders as she leaned against his back. He didn't need to see her to know that her arms were crossed in front of her chest and a smug grin was spread across her face. Her pink hair hung messily in her eyes that were probably closed or staring intently at the ground. Her personality was evident in every aspect of her posture and every word from her mouth. Time and again she'd proven herself to be an invaluable ally, and Asch hadn't once regretted his decision to enlist their help.

"Thank you for keeping an eye on Guy for me," Asch stated.

"No problem. You sure pick troublesome jobs though, honey, we had to get pretty creative to keep him from catching us," Noir said, her voice laced with her favourite tone: a sweet way of talking that bordered on seductive. "And we didn't always succeed," she added after a moment's thought.

"That's alright."

"Pretty cruel of you there, sweetheart," Noir taunted as she circled around to meet his gaze. "He couldn't touch you if he wanted to," Asch shot back. Noir smiled in defeat.

"So what's it this time?" The young bandit asked, quickly figuring out the reason for their encounter. It wasn't like it was that difficult to figure out. Her boss was cautious, played his cards very carefully, and meeting here and now was very risky for both of them. Whatever he needed must be urgent.

"It won't be easy," Asch replied.

"Honey, who do you think you're talking to?"

"It'll probably be dangerous."
"And when has *that* ever stopped you?" Noir grinned as she successfully elicited a chuckle from her boss. "Have we ever let you down before?"

"No, you've done well," Asch let out a sigh, his face growing very serious. He was worn out, tired by the multitude of troubles that he had to deal with. Even she could tell that much. Someone as young and handsome as him shouldn't have to look so grown up. But it wasn't like he had a choice. No…it wasn't like either of them had a choice, because she couldn't just abandon a sweetheart like him.

"Noir," Asch began. "I need you to find something out for me, and I need to know very soon."

The fire at the inn crackled as the flickering light it emitted chased away the cold the rain seemed to bring with it. Luke, Guy, Anise, Ion and Mieu were all seated strategically around the flames, taking in the warmth and waiting for their clothes to dry while Asch had begun pacing along the length of the fireplace. None of them had any luck in locating Natalia, and it was starting to get late. It would be dark soon, and if she didn't show up before nightfall, their chances of finding her later would be pretty slim.

'You're going to make a rut in the floor if you keep that up,' Luke commented.

'Go crawl under a rock,' Asch shot back.

'You realize your pacing is just making everyone more nervous, right? Besides, I think Anise is going to kick you into the fire the next time you pass by her.'

'I dare her to try it,' Asch stated in a bitter tone.

'Look Asch,' Luke interjected, annoyed by his brother's foul mood. Not that he could blame him, but still… 'We're all worried, but I'm sure wherever Natalia is, she's fine. Seriously, just sit down. You're going to drive us all crazy at this rate.'

But before Asch could come up with a sarcastic response, the door to the inn opened and Jade walked in with two figures trailing behind him: Tear and none other than the errant princess.

"Natalia!" Guy stood up excitedly, but backed off when he realized she hadn't been around earlier.

"Don't worry Guy," Jade cut in, "we filled her in on the details regarding our previous encounter."

"Thanks." Guy smiled almost apologetically.

"Where were you?" Ion inquired as Natalia stood in the entry way wringing the water out of her hair. "We searched everywhere for you."

"Yeah," Anise emphasized. "Why'd you take off like that without telling any of us?"

"I just took a wrong turn," Natalia said in an annoyed tone. Tear gently nudged the princess with her elbow and Natalia seemed to lighten up a bit.

"So…what took you so long to come back and find us?" Anise pried. There was a long silence before Natalia answered.

"Instead of wandering aimlessly around Sheridan searching for you, I simply used the opportunity to restock on some supplies I used up while we were at Shurrey Hill," Natalia eventually explained.
when it was clear everyone was waiting on an answer from her.

"You should have tried to find us right away rather than gone shopping," Asch scolded once Natalia had finished her explanation. "We were all really worried about you."

"That's a surprise since you don't seem to care about anything I think. Why bother having me around?" Natalia snapped back, angry at being scolded by her fiancée. But as soon as she saw the hurt look on his face, she regretted her words.

"That's not true!" Luke angrily cut in. "Asch was worried sick about you! He-"

"Luke!" Asch cut his sibling off.

"You shouldn't be going off on your own," Jade re-iterated, "especially with the God-Generals and Dorian General Grants around. You couldn't have known about the later, but the former is always a threat. Do try to keep that in mind."

"I- I'm sorry," Natalia managed. Now she felt terrible, here they were all genuinely worried about her and she was putting them down. "Asch… I'm sorry for what I said." Her fiancée gave her a weak smile and a nod in acknowledgement and acceptance of her apology.

"Look Natalia, about this whole Engeve thing," Asch began.

"No, it's alright," the princess cut him off. "I... I know you're right. I just don't like it. I don't like not being able to do anything for all those people. I can't just watch them die. If there's something I can do, I don't want to just sit back and do nothing!"

"None of us like it," Tear said softly.

"Tear's right," Ion agreed. "If given the choice, we'd all choose to save everyone. Unfortunately, something that convenient just doesn't exist in this situation. It's not possible to save everyone, so we just have to do what we can. Other than that, we'll just have to hope for the best."

Natalia listened to the Fon Master's words – and they sounded so right – but she still couldn't bring herself to accept them. Not with… No. She just couldn't. It wasn't just Engeve. This wasn't the first time, and she knew if things continued the way they were, it wouldn't be the last. Something had to be done.

"Well fortunately this mess wasn't a complete waste," Jade said with a shrug.

"What makes you say that Colonel?" Ion inquired.

"Our young Princess just happened to run into a certain someone we were searching for while she was out," Jade shrugged.

"Jade!" Natalia protested the wording the Colonel had chosen to use, her cheeks flushing.

"I was pretty surprised to say the least," the familiar voice came from the back of the room.

"Ginji!" Anise jumped. They had all been so focused on Natalia that none of them had noticed him come in behind her. "Don't do that! You scared me!"

"Sorry, Anise," Ginji chuckled.

"It's nice to see you again," Asch spoke up. "How have you been?"
"I've been busy, but not half as busy as you from what I hear. So what brings you guys here anyway? I thought you were going to stop the war."

"Yeah, that kinda failed," Anise provided.

"We were actually wondering if we could ask for your help," Asch replied, the light from the fire giving his face a dark look.

"I was hoping you would say that," Ginji answered. "You know I'll help you. Anytime, anywhere! So what's the problem?"

"It's the people of Engeve," Luke provided. "They're in danger and we need to evacuate them as soon as we can. Noelle's too busy trying to evacuate St. Binah to be able to help in time."

"So you want to use the Albiore to get them out of there faster?"

"That was our intention, yes," Jade provided taking a spot by the fire so he could dry off properly.

"No problem," Ginji said with enthusiasm, trying to lift the unsettled mood that had fallen over the entire group. Things must really be bad for such a lively bunch to be so down. "The Albiore's repairs are done so we can get going anytime. But where are you planning to evacuate everyone to?"

"Normally, the obvious choice would be Grand Chokmah," Tear provided. "But since its defences will probably be active by the time we arrive in Engeve, it's not an option. We can't bring them into Kimlascan territory either."

"What about Chesedonia?" Ion asked. "It's an autonomous state that doesn't belong to either side, so I don't see why they wouldn't accept the citizens of Engeve."

"That may not be a bad idea," Jade pondered. "Chesedonia is a fairly rich city as well and the war is unlikely to have impacted its economy that greatly. It should be able to support the citizens once we get them there, at least for the time being. It will be up to the citizens themselves to decide what they want to do beyond that."

"That's a very good point," Asch agreed. "How soon do you think we can get going?"

"The Score says it'll be sunny tomorrow, so we can take off first thing," Ginji replied.

"Alright," Asch said with a nod. "Then let's call it a night and get some rest. It's going to be a long day tomorrow."

It hadn't seemed like that long ago since he had stood at the entrance to Engeve with Tear at the very start of their journey, but as Luke thought back on it he realized just how much had happened since then. It also struck him just how much more work they had ahead of them. But for now, they just had to get the people of Engeve out of harm's way. Then they could worry about the future.

The journey to Engeve hadn't taken nearly as long as Luke had expected it would. Something about the engines involving a lot of complex terminology that only Guy could get excited over. But if it meant they could move faster, and save more people doing it, then you wouldn't catch him complaining. Now if only he could remember the mayor's name…
Luke had met a lot of people during his last stay in the small farming town. He had explored almost every nook and cranny of the town, much to Tear's dismay, who had been looking for him at the time. But in the process he had met and had interesting conversations with a lot of the people here. He wondered if anyone remembered him.

"So where do we start?" Tear inquired. She watched the people of Engeve going about their business. Other than the atmosphere that was much more unsettled then the last time she was here, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. It was hard to believe all this land was in danger of falling into the Qliphoth.

"We should stop by Rose's house," Jade suggested. "She's the Mayor here, if anyone can help us get the town evacuated, she's the one."

"Well hello!" One of the villagers stopped in passing and greeted Luke.

"Hi there!" Luke cheerfully replied, recognizing the man as one of the men he had spoken with on his previous visit.

"I remember you! You were here back around harvesting time. You're the one who helped us with the cheagle thefts. Luke, right?"

"That's right," Luke confirmed excitedly. "But I wasn't the only one who helped with the cheagles, I really didn't do much."

"Nonsense," the man dismissed Luke's humbleness. "I heard you got rid of a nest of liger eggs up in the Cheagle woods. We hadn't even thought to watch for liger nests up there, we really owe you one!"

"Really, it wasn't that big of a deal."

"Of course it is! My house is over on the north eastern edge of the village. I don't know what would have happened if ligers attacked my family. If there's anything I can do to help you out, let me know."

"Well thank you," Luke finally answered when he realized the man wasn't going to let him dismiss what he had done. It left the young noble to wonder exactly how the villagers had found out about their endeavours, but at the moment he had more important matters to deal with. "Actually, could you point me in the direction of Rose's house?"

"Sure, it's the first house on your right. You can't miss it."

"Thanks!"

"Sure thing, and stop by later if you have the time, I enjoyed our conversation last time you were here."

"I don't know if I'll have time, but if I get the chance I definitely will."

"See you!" The man called back as he continued along his way.

"Who was that?" Asch inquired.

"Just someone I met when I was here last time. You know, when Tear and I were swept away from the manor."
"Still, I'm rather surprised he remembered you," Jade provided. "It has been quite some time since we've been here."


"Well, we had best get working; we don't have much time after all." Ion knocked on the door of the house before them. Moments later, the door was opened by a woman who looked to be in her 40's and was rather well built. "Hello Rose," Ion greeted her.

"Fon Master Ion! And Colonel Curtiss!" Rose exclaimed noticing Jade standing behind the redheads. "It's a surprise to see you here, especially in these times. What in Auldrant brings you all the way to our small town?"

"I'm afraid it's not simply to visit," Jade explained. "May we come in?"

"Certainly! Come in, come in," Rose ushered them all inside. "My… your entourage has certainly grown in number since the last time you stopped by. I'm afraid I may not have enough chairs for all of you."

"Please, don't concern yourself," Ion spoke up. "I'm afraid we don't have much time to begin with."

"Goodness, what's so urgent? Does it have to do with the war?"

"You could say that," Jade stated. "The fact of the matter is, Engeve is in grave danger and it is urgent that you evacuate everyone as soon as possible. We're here to help as much as we can."

"That's going to be a problem," Rose replied solemnly.


"Well I've been concerned about the battlefronts being pushed back so I've been trying to prepare an escape route. But with the children and the elderly, there isn't any way to get everyone safely to refuge."

"That's where I can help," Ginji spoke up.

"That's right," Asch provided. "Ginji here can take the young and the elderly to Chesedonia on his flying ship. We can also transport anyone who's injured or weak that way as well. We won't have time to take everyone that way though, so some of us will still have to head by land."

"So you're suggesting that we split up and take half the villagers by land, and the other half stay to help with loading and evacuating with the Albiore?" Tear guessed.

"Precisely," Asch confirmed. "Luke, Guy and I will go by land with everyone who is able to make the trip. Everyone else please help with evacuating everyone else."

"I'll join you by land," Jade offered. "There shouldn't be anything here the girls and the Fon Master can't handle, and you're more likely to need the fighting strength passing through the battlefield."


"Are you sure you don't want someone who can heal as well?" Tear offered. "I don't mind joining you."

"Though your skills would be welcome, they're going to need the extra help here," Jade provided. "Ideally we won't have to deal with anything beyond a few wild monsters. We have no intentions
of trying to engage those in the battlefield."

"But what about the villagers? I doubt you'll be able to get to Chesedonia without anyone getting
hurt," Tear protested.

"Don't you worry about that," Rose spoke up. "There are a few able healers here and I know a
couple who will be more than able to make the trip by land."

"Now we just need to get the villagers organized," Ion pointed out.

"Leave that to me!" Rose stated. "We'll gather everyone in town square and work from there. Don't
underestimate us; we stick together in this town. There's nothing we can't get done if we put our
minds to it."

"That's good to hear," the young Fon Master replied.

"Then let's get to work, the faster we can get things going the better," Asch pointed out. "I highly
doubt the battlefield will get any less intense."

"Well then, let's work on spreading the word and gathering everyone together in the town square,"
Luke suggested.

"That's a good idea," Asch agreed. "We should probably split into three groups. Jade can lead one
group; he's from the military so you shouldn't have any problems, same with Ion since he's the Fon
Master. Natalia, would you go with Jade? Anise and Guy can go with Ion, then Luke, Tear and I
will manage somehow.

"You shouldn't have any trouble," Jade said in that mocking tone of his. "You have Luke with
you."

Asch simply rolled his eyes. "Uh huh, sure. Now get going old man, or the war will be over before
you get anything worthwhile done."

"One could only hope wars would resolve so quickly," Jade said simply.

"Oh, just go."

"Yes, your Majesty," Jade replied with a mock bow. Asch almost growled. If Rose wasn't still in
the room he would have socked the man right then and there.

"Your Majesty?" Rose inquired confusedly. Asch's palm hit his forehead.

"It's a long story," Luke provided with a nervous smile. "We really should be going; we'll meet up
with you later."

"Certainly, good luck to you!"

"Thanks, you too!"

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Much to Asch's dismay, Jade had proven to be right after all. Though Asch wasn't sure if he should
be happy or not. He hated that Jade had been right… but the fact of the matter remained that things
were going much smoother than he had anticipated.
As it turned out, the man they had met at the entrance wasn't the only person who remembered Luke. It almost seemed like Luke had succeeded in meeting every villager in all of Engeve during that day he had run off on his own. It certainly made the evacuation efforts much easier. The fact that Luke and Tear were known to the villagers as the ones who had eliminated the liger nest certainly helped matters as well. Most of the villagers were more than willing to listen to what the three of them had to say and all too often Asch and Tear had to cut the younger noble's conversation off and shuffle him over to the next house only to repeat the entire process all over again.

"Just when did you meet all these people?" Asch whispered to Tear while Luke was engaged in another conversation.

"I honestly don't know," Tear replied dumbfounded. "I only lost him for half a day; I guess he met a lot of people in that time."

"Maybe, but still you were only here for a day." Asch eyed the melodist but Tear simply shrugged, she didn't have any more answers than he did.

"My my, and what are we up to over here?" Jade's voice came from between the two teenagers. Tear's heart nearly leapt out of her chest as she stumbled forward, away from the unexpected intruder. Rather than react as Tear did, Asch's fist instinctively found its way to Jade's face only to be caught at the last second by the devious Colonel. "Violent, aren't we?"

"Seems like your bad habits are rubbing off on the rest of us," Asch commented.

"What do you mean? I am completely opposed to unnecessary violence," Jade said in that sickeningly fake tone of his.

"Sure, and I'm Yulia's cousin."

"No, you're not doing anything productive," Jade shot back. "We can't have Luke doing all the work, now can we?"

"And what about you?" Asch shot back.

"We're done informing the citizens on the western side of town."

"This is the last house for us too," the redhead answered, getting somewhat defensive. Tear just shook her head. Since when was this a competition?

"Then shall we fetch your other half?" Jade suggested. "There's much more work to be done before we can leave, and I'm sure I don't need to remind you that we're working on a time limit."

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Ion let out a huge sigh as he placed the last crate on the small wagon. They couldn't afford to bring very many wagons with them. Even though they planned to try and avoid the main battlefield, there would be a great deal of danger and the small caravans were difficult to conceal. But it was a risk they would have to take, after all, they still had to feed everyone for the week or so that they had anticipated the trip would take. He just hoped everyone would make it to Chesedonia safe and sound.

The young Fon Master pulled himself up onto the edge of the wagon and allowed himself to sit and rest for a bit. He just wasn't cut out for physical labour, but he wanted to help out as much as he
could none-the-less. Anise had made him promise five times over that he would sit and rest when he needed it before she would even consider letting him help out. Though she had eventually conceded, Ion could still see her watching him from afar and could tell she disapproved of him hauling crates of food, even if they were the smaller, lighter ones. He would never hear the end of it if he wore himself right out, and it wasn't like a little rest wasn't welcome.

So in the meantime, Ion was content to simply watch everyone coming and going. Rose had been right, and it was quite the sight to see everyone in Engeve working so well together. It was nice to see everyone in their group working so hard as well. Even Natalia, who they all knew would rather be trying to put a stop to the war, was working her hardest at getting everyone ready. Luke in particular was doing really well. If he wasn't helping direct and organize people, he was helping to gather supplies and load the wagons. It was completely different from his attitude in Akzeriuth. He seemed so much more certain of his own abilities, a thought that made the young Fon Master smile.

"Hey Ion, how are you doing?" Luke asked as he set another crate of food into the cart the Fon Master was sitting on.

"I'm doing fine Luke, how are you?" Ion replied with a gentle smile.

"Good, Jade thinks we should be ready to leave by tomorrow morning."

"That's sooner than you expected, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I think Jade thought it would take longer to gather supplies," the young noble explained.

"That's true, but if there's one thing that's nice about Engeve, it's that they're almost never short on food."


"You seem to be enjoying yourself," Ion commented, noticing Luke's good spirits.

"I guess you could say that. It's not like I'm glad that the land is falling or anything, but it feels really good to be able to help out, you know?"

"I do, there's so much joy to be had in helping those in need."

"I better get back to work if we want to be ready by the morning," Luke said with a sigh as he glanced around the town square. There was still a lot left to do.

"I'll come too," Ion offered.

"That's okay, I know you just sat down. I've only got the last few crates to load then I'll be taking a break too."

"Okay, don't work yourself too hard."

"I won't!" Luke waved as he ran off to load the crates into the other wagon. It was such a shame he'd been confined to Baticul all his life. He obviously took so much pleasure in being able to help others; there were so many wonderful things he could have accomplished.

Regardless, it made Ion happy to see his friend in such good cheer. Ion froze at the thought. That's right, Luke was his friend, as was everyone else they'd travelled with. Seeing them happy made him happy, and it bothered him to see them upset. Without even realizing it, they had all become so
important to him. The memories he shared with them were the most precious times he'd ever had in
his short life, and he wished for nothing more than for those times to continue on forever.

Sadly, it didn't seem like things would stay that way for much longer unless something was done.
There was something wrong. It had been lurking beneath the surface ever since the war had
started, but no one would talk about it. Perhaps no one even knew what it was, but it was there.
This war had everyone tense, himself included, and he could almost definitely say it was entirely
Mohs' fault. Well that was something he was more than capable of handling, and that man had
better have a very good explanation for his actions if intended to remain within a mile of Daath.

But above and beyond Mohs and his vexatious schemes, something seemed to be bothering
everyone, Asch in particular. Perhaps it was simply the stress of dealing with everything going on
at the moment that Ion had been noticing, but Asch looked worn, like he hadn't slept peacefully in
days. Though he wouldn't say it, Ion suspected he blamed himself for the war. He had tried
speaking to the redhead; Asch just wouldn't open up with him the way Luke would, and so he left
Ion to wonder. He certainly hoped Asch had no intention of taking responsibility for Mohs'
machinations, even if only to himself. He only wished there was something he could do.

The Fon Master hopped down off the wagon, the best thing they could do was to hurry and get
everyone to safety. Then they could find a way to end this war, not to mention put Mohs in his
place once and for all. Then there was Van, who still had to be dealt with. Why he sought such
destruction was beyond Ion. For as long as he had known the man he seemed dedicated and strong-
hearted; perhaps that was the reason he had to see his goals, whatever they were, to the end,
regardless of the sacrifices along the way. But that just couldn't be allowed, no matter what the
desired result may be. Ion only hoped they could end it in a way that wouldn't be devastating for
Tear. Then, maybe then, they could all truly smile again.


'Fine up here, though I'm getting the feeling everyone's more than ready to call it a day,' Luke
replied. 'How about back there?'

'About the same, we should try to keep going for a bit longer, at least until the sun sets. We don't
want to waste any daylight. I know it's hard on everyone, but it's only going to be that much harder
if we drag this out for an extra few days. Not to mention the longer we're out here, the better
chance there is of us getting in trouble.'

'I'd say you excel at that no matter how long you stay out,' Luke couldn't resist the taunt.

'Look who's talking,' Asch shot back. 'Now pay attention to where you're walking, we can't have
Engeve's hero walking into a tree.'

'Shut up!'

"Something the matter?" Jade asked the younger sibling.

"No nothing," Luke replied, eyeing Jade carefully. If this morning had been any indication, today
was not a day to be crossing Jade. Not that there was ever a good day to cross Jade, but he seemed
on top of his game, and Luke had no intention of testing just how good Jade Curtiss could be when
on some sort of vendetta. Luke had no idea what Asch had done, but Jade had oh so cleverly
trapped his older brother with Guy for a full 12 hours, bringing up the rear while he and said
Colonel led the citizens around the edge of the battlefield. If the two of them were both still in one piece by the time they set up camp for the night, he'd be very surprised.

"What's on your mind?" Jade inquired casually.


"Now, now, don't lie to me young man," the Colonel taunted. "I have more than ample resources to pry the truth out of you if need be, and rest assured, they aren't free of... shall we say...sensory stimulation." Luke slowly edged away from the Necromancer. He didn't even want to know.

"Really, I'm not thinking about much, just the future I guess."

"And what about the future has you thinking so hard?" Jade prodded.

"I don't know, all sorts of things. Like, what do nobles really do for a living? I know my father is always busy, but I've never bothered to find out exactly what he does."

"Ah, I see."

"You see what?" Luke asked sceptically.

"Nothing in particular. To answer your question, it depends on many things. For the most part the nobility don't do terribly much. There are a few exceptions, of course, and I suspect your father is likely one of them, but they usually just oversee the Governors and Mayors in the regions they're in charge of. Duke Fabre, I believe, is in charge of the Belkend and Sheridan areas."


"Not especially appealing?"


"Can't say I blame you, I've always found that sort of thing dreadfully boring. It was more my sister's cup of tea."

"You have a sister?"

'Jade has a sister?!'

'Stop eavesdropping.' Luke punctuated his point with a mental shove.

"Yes, she still lives in my hometown," Jade provided.

"And where's that?" It was Luke's turn to pry.

"Ah, here." Jade stopped.

"Here?" Luke looked around. They had stopped in a small clearing, hidden from view by a stand of trees. "You lived here?"

'No you idiot.' Asch was laughing so hard, Luke could have sworn he could hear him all the way from the back.

"I think we'll stop here for the night," Jade stated. "Would you kindly go inform Asch and Guy?"
"Won't they-"

"We'd hate for them to get separated in the dark," Jade cut Luke off. The young noble realized it was probably safer not to try and convince Jade that it was completely pointless and that both Asch and Guy would catch up with them as the villagers stopped for the night. Jade was just downright scary.

"Hey there," Asch said quietly, announcing his presence before sitting down beside his startled little brother. "You're not a very good watch if you're startled by that."

"My turn's almost over anyways," Luke replied with a yawn. "I'm going to go get Jade pretty quick. What has you up at this hour?" Asch brought a finger to his lips. Luke put a hand over his mouth. He had forgotten everyone was sleeping nearby. Not to mention the fact that the last thing they wanted to do was draw attention. Luke looked at his brother curiously. What were those papers he was holding onto?

But before Luke could ask, a familiar head-splitting pain crashed over him. If he hadn't been fully awake before, he most certainly was now. Luke brought a hand up to his head and tried to massage his temples, but it did nothing to alleviate the pain. From the looks of things, Asch wasn't faring much better. Just what the hell was with these Score-forsaken headaches?

Awaken….same as…hear…voice…freed….must…hurry.

There it was, same as always, same senseless assortment of words. Whatever this voice was trying to say, the important stuff wasn't getting through. Luke almost wished he could just get the message, and then maybe the headaches would stop. Thankfully, just like always, once the voice had vanished, the pain went away.

"You okay?" Luke asked, remembering to keep his voice down this time.

"Yeah," Asch replied. "That was really weird, I wonder if-"

"I wish whoever the hell that was would just shut up," Luke grumbled, inadvertently cutting his sibling off.

"Actually, that's what I came here to talk to you about."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah," Asch confirmed, "I almost wonder if he was trying to interrupt us."

"Why, do you know who it is? Or better yet, how they're doing it?" Luke inquired.

"I think so, and that last part is really the key. I mean, whoever, or whatever is doing this is communicating with us through our fon slots, the same way we talk to each other."

"Yeah, but how is that possible?"

"It shouldn't be, unless it has the same fonon frequency as we do," Asch explained.

"But wait a second, isn't that impossible?" Luke just couldn't follow Asch's train of thought.

"It should be, but take a look at this." Asch placed the papers he had been hanging onto into the
"These are the reports from the fon disk we found at Choral Castle, look here," Asch pointed to a specific line.


"I know it's a number you idiot," Asch playfully took a swing at Luke but Luke managed to duck just in time. "But it's not just a random number, it a fonon frequency."

"Well if it's a fonon frequency, and it's on the disk from Choral Castle, then it's our fonon frequency, right?"

"It should be, that's why it's bothering me. Do you remember what Jade said in Deo Pass?" Luke shook his head. Asch sighed and continued. "This is Lorelei's fonon frequency."

"Whoa, whoa, slow down. You think that Lorelei has the same fonon frequency we do? You think that the aggregate sentience of the Seventh Fonon is trying to talk into our heads?"

"You don't have to say it like that," Asch grumbled. "That's just what I'm thinking right now. Jade could be right and extra Seventh Fonons during the replication process caused this number to be recorded, but I really don't think so. At the very least, there's a chance we may have the same fonon frequency that Lorelei does." Luke simply stared and slowly shook his head. "What?" Asch finally asked.

"When did you have time to think about all this?"

"Well it was a long and boring walk," Asch replied.

"You worry about things way too much." Luke rolled his eyes, but Asch grew solemn.

"There's a lot to worry about," Asch pointed out. Both boys fell silent for while.

"Say Asch, where did you get those papers?" Luke finally inquired, desperate for a new topic to lighten the mood.


"You are a dead man."

"Oh shut up," Asch said with a smirk before throwing said papers at his younger brother.

"You two are going to attract the entire Kimlascan army if you keep this up," a familiar voice came from the shadows.

"Jade!" Luke stated as loud as he dared before spinning around to face the man who had been standing behind him.

'How long-' Luke asked, his thoughts still in a panic.

'Don't worry, he didn't hear us before,' Asch lied. Though he had only seen the Colonel after he'd spoken, Asch didn't doubt at least some of their whispers had reached the Colonel's all too keen ears. It was a pity; he would have liked to ask Jade's opinion on the matter. But it would have to wait.

"I think it's time you two head off to bed," Jade suggested in a tone that made it clear that it wasn't simply a suggestion. "We'll be up at first light so be sure to get some rest."
"Sure," Asch replied as he began to pick up the papers.

"I can take care of that," Jade said simply, snatching the papers from Asch's hands. "Now off to sleep you two and I don't want to hear another peep out of you, have I made myself clear?"

"Perfectly," both boys answered in unison, before retreating into the darkness.

'That was close,' Luke said with a huge sigh. 'I'd watch your back tomorrow though.'

'Let him try it,' Asch replied somewhat defiantly.

'That was scary; I thought for sure he'd have overheard us talking.'

'Actually Luke, that's something else I wanted to talk to you about. How long do you plan on keeping it undercover that you're a replica?'

'As long as I have to! Since when-'

'Look, before you get mad, hear me out,' Asch cut Luke off. 'I know how Tear feels, and I know it's difficult. I don't blame you for not wanting to say anything, but think about it. Even once all this is over, it's not like you're never going to see Tear or the others again. Are you going to keep it a secret for the rest of your life?'

'I…' Luke was at a loss for words, but Asch could feel his raw desire to completely reject the idea where it stood. He just couldn't find the logic.

'The more you wait, the harder it's going to be, because you'll have been lying to them for that much longer. You can't keep it a secret forever. Promise me you'll at least think about it?'


Asch rolled over and stared up at the stars. He was incredibly surprised he'd gotten out of that one without getting into a fight with Luke. Though he knew full well that while Luke may think about it, he was nowhere near ready to actually consider doing it; then again, the fact Luke had listened to reason was proof he had come a ways since the last time this topic had come up. Maybe once everything was over…

Asch sighed; when everything was over… the day when that happened wouldn't come fast enough. There was so much going on, on so many fronts. First and foremost there was Van, and whatever the hell he was planning, and why in all of Auldrant he seemed so desperate for Asch's cooperation. Was it his hyperresonance? No, if that was the case he could have easily gotten Luke's help back before his overt treachery in Akzeriuth. What could he possibly accomplish with a gigantic replica? He wasn't seriously trying to recreate Hod was he? At the cost of the entire world? He may trust Van about as far as he could throw the man, but he'd like to believe his former teacher wasn't a lunatic.

Then of course there was Mohs and the war. They had been so close to thwarting him on that front, if only someone hadn't revealed their presence in Baticul. Who had it been? Was it someone among them, or was it someone else altogether? There were so many unknown variables floating around, it made him uncomfortable. It wasn't Luke, but that was the only person he could know for sure. Ion, Jade, Anise, Tear? He had no idea. He doubted it was Natalia, she was far too avid when it came to her duties to her country. Nothing, and he meant nothing, up to and including Van Grants himself could get her to abandon Kimlasca when it needed her.

But then that was the problem now wasn't it. There were times when such things had to be set
aside, and it was hard for her to accept that… or perhaps he simply accepted it far too easily. But either way, he was bothered by her actions lately. Asch could feel sleep beckoning him away from his troubled thoughts. The promise of some serenity was all too appealing, but at the same time, he just couldn't shake Natalia's strange moods from his mind. Natalia was dedicated; she had a kind heart, and was always willing to help those in need of it. So why she was acting so spiteful lately was completely beyond him. Did she feel they were ignoring her? Not considering what she wanted? It was true that most of their decisions lately had been opposite of what she had wanted, perhaps that was the problem. But finding a way to fix that wouldn't be easy.

Asch was no longer able to resist the world of dreams that was calling to him, and he quietly slipped into a restless slumber. He just didn't know what to do anymore, and that was a fact that he simply couldn't escape.

Luke lay under the stars, his eyes were closed, but he was a long way from any form of sleep. He could sense Asch's thoughts, racing on an endless wheel of problem after problem. Asch refused to share any of these problems, but that didn't stop Luke from worrying about him. His older brother was notorious for trying to handle everyone's issues and not letting anyone share in his problems. He would drive himself insane doing that one of these days.

As he lay there, he sensed a very familiar feeling. Asch's presence had curled up against his own. It reminded Luke of the days when they were little. Asch would sneak into his bed, for what Luke now knew must have been nightmares from the kidnapping. Asch had never once spoken of it, but it was something that stayed with him, even now. Luke smiled, he vaguely remembered doing the same thing for awhile. Though they were both far too old for such things, there was just something reassuring about having someone you trust at your side; it could chase away even the darkest fears.

Luke debated what to do. The last thing he wanted was Asch to find out about his nightmares concerning Akzeriuth. After all, Asch didn't need anything else to worry about… but the more Luke thought about it, the more he couldn't bring himself to close Asch out. He would just have to hope that Asch wouldn't notice, or if he did, that he wouldn't concern himself about it, though there was a fat chance of the latter ever happening. His older brother needed any and all the comfort he could get. He was already at his wits' end trying to figure out what Van was doing, trying to stop a war and a psychotic Grand Maestro, all the while worried sick about Natalia and why she was on some sort of vendetta against Luke. Luke wracked his brains, but he couldn't for the life of him figure out what he did to set her off so bad. What was her problem? Couldn't she see how hard all of this was on Asch? She should be at his side trying to help him, not criticizing him every step of the way!

Luke calmed his thoughts before he woke his sibling. It wouldn't take much to disturb his fitful sleep and Luke could vouch for what sleep deprivation could do to a person. It was one thing to sleep, and it was completely separate thing to actually get some rest. He only wished there was more he could do.

But there was, Luke knew there was. Though it may not seem like much, it was something he could do, and it would give Asch one less thing to worry about. He may not be able to figure things out like Asch could, but he could still protect everyone. He would make sure that no one got hurt, and that every person here would get to Chesedonia safe and sound.

And unlike Akzeriuth, he would do it properly this time.
The Last Straw

Much like Engeve, it didn't seem as if Chesedonia had changed much since their previous visit. But that was at a distance, once everyone had gotten within the city's limits, it was easy to see that Chesedonia had gone nuts. If there was one good thing about war, it was that it did wonders for the economy, and from the looks of things, Chesedonia was in no slouch.

Luke didn't think Chesedonia's streets could have gotten any busier, but they most definitely had. Blue uniforms could be seen everywhere as Malkuth soldiers hurried about, keeping the city's regular inhabitants on their toes. It seemed like even more merchants had taken up along the streets in hopes of cashing in on the thriving opportunities. There was really only one word to describe this sort of situation: chaos.

'What is all this?' Luke vaguely inquired, not really expecting an answer.

'This is the darkest side of war,' Asch replied.

'And what's that?'

'The people who can profit from the misery of others.'

'But it's not like it's their fault, they still have to make a living,' Luke pointed out. Asch gave Luke a weak smile before ruffling his hair.

'I know, but I still don't like it.'

Once all of Engeve's citizens had reached the safety of the city's boundaries, it didn't take them long to disperse. Some of them had been lucky enough to have family or friends in Chesedonia, others knew merchants that could offer them shelter, but for the most of them, they now had the task of finding themselves a place to stay. Not an easy feat from the looks of just how much Chesedonia's population had swelled, especially after having made such a difficult journey.

All things considered, they had been really lucky. Not one person had been killed and only three had ended up with some minor injuries from an unexpected encounter with a pack of ligers. But while there hadn't been any physical injuries, not everyone had gotten through the journey unscathed. Luke eyed his older sibling and even from where he was, he could tell that Asch was half asleep on his feet. Whether it had been by design or not, somehow Asch had ended up stuck on night watch for the rest of the trip and allowed to sleep in the caravans during the day. No one could get any sort of sleep in those bumpy things and everyone knew it. It did however, serve as a good reminder not to cross Jade at any point in the near or distant future. But as dangerous an idea as that may be, Luke certainly had no intention of abandoning Asch, and if he knew his sibling as well as he thought he did, there would be some fun for both of them at some point in the future.

But that was the future, and they had a present to worry about if they ever wanted to get there. First things first, they had to catch up with the girls, Ion and Ginji. Hopefully everything had gone according to schedule on their end. Luke had been especially worried about the possibility of the God-Generals trying to interfere, and if they did, the team that had stayed behind in Engeve was sorely lacking in offensive strength. Of course this thought hadn't hit him until the second day, and he cursed himself for not thinking of it sooner. But Jade didn't seem overly concerned when Luke had approached him about it, so there couldn't be too much to worry about. At least, Luke hoped so; there really was no understanding what went through Jade's head at any given moment.
"So when are we going to meet up with the others?" Guy asked, his voice practically trembling. It hadn't even been ten minutes and he was already at his wits' end trying to avoid all the women mixed among the crowds. It looked about as easy as dodging water in a rain storm.

"Well, assuming they had no difficulties, they should be done by nightfall at the latest. I suggest we head to the inn and wait for them there. I highly doubt they'll spot us in this," Jade waved his arm to indicate the crowds. As if Guy didn't notice already.

"Hmmm…Not a bad plan," Luke stated, deciding to join in on Jade's game of prolonging their time in the crowd.

"Can we just go to the inn, please?" Guy pleaded after just having the ninth woman accidentally bumped into him. Any longer and he'd have a mental breakdown.

"Yeah," Luke gave in with a chuckle. "Let's head over there, you never know, they may already be waiting for us. You coming, Asch?" Luke peered over his shoulder but didn't find his brother there. No wonder something felt off; Luke was surprised he didn't notice sooner given the lack of sarcastic commentary on Guy's phobia.

"Asch?" Luke tried calling out but he was easily drowned out by the mass of people. Across from him, Luke could see Jade scanning the crowd, trying to see if perhaps he had just been shuffled off. "Asch!" Luke tried again, still to no avail.

'Asch!' Luke tried a third time, this time circumventing the interference of the crowds.

"What?" Asch answered aloud and startling the redhead he was standing behind.

"There you are! Where were you?"

"I was just right there," Asch pointed to the entrance to a nearby alley.

"What's that?" Luke inquired noticing the paper in Asch's hand.

"Just some information I was looking for."

"I take it you got the answer you wanted," Luke replied with a mischievous grin that slowly leaked onto his brother's face.

"What make you say that?"

"You look happy about it."

"I guess you could say it explains a lot, and puts a few things to rest at the very least," Asch provided.

"Oh?" Jade's interest was piqued. "And do you have any intention of sharing this information?"

"I will when it's needed," Asch said simply. Luke could sense the pure satisfaction Asch felt from being able to bait Jade. "Now, shall we head to the inn before Guy ends up in heart failure over there?"


"I guess that's fair," Jade shrugged. As fun as watching the blonde was, Asch raised a valid point. It wouldn't do any good to break him, now would it? After all… good entertainment was so hard to find these days.
It was almost sunset by the time Natalia and the others arrived at the inn. They had managed to get everyone to safety without any significant troubles, though Anise would disagree. Unfortunately for her, Asch was inclined to take Mieu's side, obviously the bucket of water had dumped itself on her and it was in no way the little cheagle's fault. Asch couldn't help but snicker, he really shouldn't be so quick to take sides against Anise, but she was one of those people that was so much fun to tease. But bucket of water aside, everyone was happy, and they could safely say that the evacuation was a success.

Even Natalia seemed to be in good spirits, a fact that helped to somewhat relieve Asch's nerves. Though it hadn't been what she wanted, she took too much pleasure in helping those in need to not be at least a little satisfied at accomplishing such a huge endeavour. Now if only he could get the whole war thing sorted out, maybe he could finally get a decent night's sleep. Not that Jade had helped in that regard, he'd get the bastard back one of these days.

"Have you been to see Astor yet?" Tear inquired once everyone was done chatting about recent events.

"No, we haven't," Luke answered. "Should we?"

"I think it would be courteous to inform him of the citizens we brought here," Ion said with a smile.

"Yeah, that's true," Luke replied. "Why not head out now and catch him before it gets too late?"

"That's a good plan," Jade agreed. "This way we can be off first thing in the morning."

"Yes," Natalia also interjected. "If we act quickly there's a chance we can save at least some of the soldiers. I know-" Natalia held her hands up before anyone could argue, "I know that we won't do much since the land's ready to fall any time, but if there's even a small chance that we can get the back lines out of there, we have to try."

"Then let's go see Astor," Tear stood up and was followed by everyone else. Natalia smiled at Tear, giving her silent gratitude that the melodist accepted with a smile of her own.

"Yeah let's go! Let's go!" Mieu bounced out the door after the girls.

"Well there's no stopping him now is there?" Luke chuckled.

"Nope, no stopping any of them," Guy agreed. "I gotta say though, I'm impressed with how well Tear's been handling Natalia. Say Asch, shouldn't that be your job?"

Asch shot Guy a dirty look. "Shall we assign you to handle Natalia?"

"Well then, let's go see Astor! Mieu! Wait up!" Guy took off to catch up with the girls who were several feet ahead of them. Luke couldn't help but laugh.

Some things just never changed.

"Hello everyone! Welcome!" Astor welcomed his newest guests. They were all seated in the same
room as during their previous visit, and Astor's manor certainly hadn't become any less…
colourful. "It's an honour to have you here again Fon Master! And you two!" The merchant turned
towards Asch and Natalia. "There were all sorts of nasty rumours flying around that you'd been
killed. I'm glad to see they were just rumours!"

"Thank you for seeing us on such sort notice," Ion said with gratitude.

"Why it's no problem at all! Anything for you Fon Master."

"I'm grateful for your support," Ion replied.

"What can I do for you today?" Astor asked, this time directing his comment to the entire group.

"I'd like to make a request, if I may?" Ion spoke on behalf of everyone.

"Like I said, anything I can do for you Fon Master!" Astor said with a laugh.

"We've brought with us the citizens from Engeve. They were forced to evacuate and there was
nowhere else for them to go. Could we ask you to take them in for the time being?"

"Of course, that's no problem at all. I'm sure you probably noticed, but things have been going very
well around here! As much as I hate the idea of war, I can't say I dislike what it does for the
economy!" Astor finished with another laugh that was, if possible, even more sinister than his last
one. A couple faint chuckles could be heard from their group, more as a courtesy rather than
because anything Astor said was funny. Luke could feel Asch shift uncomfortably in his seat.

Astor was an interesting man to say the least, and Luke wasn't quite sure what to make of him. He
didn't seem like a bad guy, but anyone who heard that laugh of his could easily be led to believe
otherwise. It just sounded… so evil. It sounded like something you'd expect to hear from some
maniacal villain in a storybook. Add that to the gleam in his eye and Luke almost wondered if it
was really this man trying to annihilate the world. Luke suppressed a chuckle at how carried away
his imagination had gotten. Perhaps Astor was simply living proof you can't judge people by their
appearances.

"Thank you very much," Ion finally answered when Astor had finished laughing.

"Well, you just make sure to tell them to stay within the city's boundaries. It's far too dangerous to
be wandering very far beyond them these days."

"I doubt any of them are particularly eager to go exploring," Jade pointed out. "But may I ask why
the danger? I hadn't heard of any battles occurring close enough to pose a threat to Chesedonia."

"Oh, it isn't the war. It's becoming quite dangerous to go too far beyond Chesedonia's limits these
days, what with the earthquakes and all."

"Earthquakes?" Luke stood up, failing to hide the panic in his voice.

"Yes, there have been quite a few recently. It's been to the point that several cracks have started to
show up in the ground. I've been encouraging people not to leave since some of the roads have also
been affected. Why if I didn't know better, I'd say Chesedonia was sinking!" Astor laughed, but this
time everyone else was dead silent. "What's the matter?" The cheery merchant finally asked.

"You may not be that far from the truth," Jade explained, pushing his glasses back up the bridge of
his nose. "How long has it been since the earthquakes and changes in the land started?"
"Well the earthquakes have been going on for a couple months now, but the reports of cracks and changes in the land have only started within the past couple weeks."

"So what's the deal Colonel?" Anise prodded the silent Jade. "Do think Chesedonia's in danger of falling or what?"

"Falling?" Astor spoke up. "What do you mean by falling?"

"I'm sure you've heard about what happened to Akzeriuth," Asch said solemnly. His face had taken on a similar neutral expression to Jade's; something most of them had come to recognize as them thinking about something.

"Well, yes. You don't mean to say the same thing is going to happen here?"

"I'm afraid that's a distinct possibility," Ion provided.

"Is there anything we can do?" Astor inquired.

"I'm afraid this time around evacuation is out of the question," Jade finally spoke up. "With the war going on, there's nowhere for the people to go."

"But what can we do?" Luke asked, trying to keep the panic in his voice to a minimum. "We brought everyone this far, we can't let them die now!"

"We know." Tear put a comforting hand on Luke's shoulder. "We're going to do everything we can to protect them."

"Ion," Guy spoke up. "Where's the passage ring for this area?"

"Chesedonia is supported by the Sephiroth in the Zao Ruins," the young Fon Master provided.

"Let's head there," Guy suggested. "We're not going to get much done hanging around here. At the very least we can check it out and see if there's anything we can do about the situation from there."

"Guy's right," Luke agreed. "We should at least go look."

"Astor, is there any way of warning the people here without starting a panic?" Asch asked.

"It won't be easy, but I'll figure something out. Leave it to us."

"Alright, I guess we'll head out first thing in the morning then," Asch declared as he stood up. "We should head back to the inn and get some sleep."

"I'll remain here and give Astor some of the details about our current situation," Jade replied. "I'll return later."

"Thank you, Jade," Ion smiled.

"Shall we wait for you?" Tear inquired.

"No. You and Luke should rest up, we'll be needing your abilities, and this would be a terribly inconvenient time to have you pass out on us."

"He has a point," Asch taunted.

"Don't worry Astor, we'll be sure to protect Chesedonia," Luke reassured the man.
"You won't if you don't go get some sleep," Asch pointed out, as he ushered his brother and the melodist after the others.

"Yes I will," Luke solemnly replied. "I'll do whatever it takes."

*I won't let anyone else die.*

Anise hated the desert. She had always figured she would never really like it; a beach with no water wasn't any kind of fun, but she had no idea just how awful a place the desert really was. It was sickeningly hot, unbelievably dry, and there was sand everywhere! It was going to take forever to get it all out of her hair. The young Fon Master Guardian grumbled at the thought. The sand would be bad enough, but even with her pigtails, her raven locks were going to be an intangible mess with the wind throwing it around like this. She just wished they could get there already!

At least they didn't have to cross the entire desert on foot, Anise was grateful for that much. Poor Ginji had done his best to get them as close to the half-buried ruins as he could, but landing on the sand drifts was difficult at best, and they'd had to settle for landing a half-hour's walk away. Still… Anise would be willing to bet a month's wages that they had been walking for at least an hour! The stupid heat had a magical way of making everything look so much closer than it really was, and the distant reprieve seemed to be slowly crawling away from her. Maybe Zao Ruins was running away from them. It wouldn't surprise her.

After walking for what seemed like days, they finally made it to the ruins' makeshift entrance. Over the years, the hot desert winds had almost completely buried the entire thing in sand. The only way in was what looked like an old window that wasn't quite submerged in the burning hot gritty stuff. Into the mouth of the proverbial beast, huh? If it meant reprieve from the heat, Anise was ready to jump into the mouth of one of Gloomietta's ligers.

What none of them had known was that Zao Ruins was a bit of a misnomer. Yes, it was technically a set of ruins, and they were ruined, but for some reason, the name seemed to imply a building, maybe a couple old temples or something. This, this was an entire underground city! Stone houses, buildings, temples, you name it and you could find it somewhere among the endless maze of roads and bridges. It left Anise to wonder what had happened to the people who had lived here, and what sort of fate had befallen them. Was the rest of the world doomed to vanish just like these people had? No! No way was she going to sit back and watch as the Commandant disassembled their world. She may not be as passionate about it as Luke and Asch seemed to be, but she wasn't just going to let it happen either. There were too many important things in this world to just let it disappear into the Qliphoth.

"Wait," Tear held her arm out, blocking Luke and everyone behind them from proceeding forward.

"What is it Tear?" Luke whispered but was ignored by the melodist who was focused on something.

"Watch it!" Tear shoved Luke backwards and into Guy before jumping aside herself. The arte landed in the empty space where the two teenagers had just been standing.

"Impressive job Tear," a voice echoed in the cavern. "You've been practicing."

"Cantabile!" Guy yelled, his own voice rebounding off the stone walls. "Come out here!"

"Now, now, no need to be yelling," the violet haired God-General stepped out from behind the
rock she had been using as cover. "I'd hate to bring that much sand down on our heads." Despite
the joking tone that she was using, the threat Cantabile spoke of was very real. Everyone had
noticed the sand that fell through the many cracks and holes in the ceiling, and it wouldn't take
much to bury them all deep beneath the surface.

"I'll pass on being buried alive thanks," Anise said with a sneer. "What do you want?"

"I'm here for the boy and the Fon Master," Cantabile answered. "But I'm hoping I'll leave here with
more company than just them."

"What do you mean by that?" Tear demanded.

"Come on Tear, you don't really think Van wants to see you die with this wretched world do you?"

"I…"

"The same thing goes for you Gailardia. Both of you are very important to him, and he would love
nothing more than to share the new world with you. You're both more than welcome to join me.
For Mr. Sacred Flame over there and the Fon Master, however, I'm going to have to insist."

"I'm sorry Cantabile," Guy replied. "I don't want to fight you, but I've made my choice. I can't side
with you and Van, not with what you're trying to accomplish."

"You say that, but do you really know what we're trying to do?"

"You're right," Jade interjected. "We don't know what you're trying to do. Care to fill us in?"

"Sorry Necromancer, but I'm not Dist. You're going to have to do better than that if you want to
trick information out of me."

"What about you, Tear?" Cantabile turned to the melodist. "Are you going to fight your own
brother without at least finding out what he's trying to accomplish?"

"How did you know to find us here?!" Asch demanded, drawing the pressure from Tear who
couldn't find the answer to her former mentor's question.

"You aren't the only ones with a convenient source of information," Cantabile shot, her expression
turning venomous.

"Major Cantabile's squad specializes in information gathering," Tear provided.

"Don't think we don't know about your information raiding in Daath," Cantabile continued,
oblivious to her student's interruption. "Rest assured, you won't be getting away with it again."

Asch made mental note of Cantabile's threat. He had no intentions of testing Noir's skills against
Cantabile's will. But that was for later; right now he was the one that had to contend with the angry
God-General. She was clearly after him, and they didn't have the time to deal with her. From the
looks of the land, they had next to no time left. Chesedonia was due in the Qliphoth any time now.

"Well, Tear? Gailardia? Are you coming or not?"

"I've told you before Cantabile, I'm not coming with you," Guy repeated.

"Why not? Why are you siding with them?"

"What you're doing is wrong," Guy stated, drawing his sword. "What happened on Hod isn't their
"fault. Killing them won't accomplish a thing!"

"But that's where you're wrong," Cantabile answered, her eyes alight with fury as she drew her own sword. "It will accomplish everything."

Cantabile easily singled Asch out and the redhead barely got his sword out in time to block her strike. "Not bad," she said with a malicious grin. "I would expect no less, seeing as you're Van's student. But don't think that means you can beat me!"

Cantabile's strikes were relentless, and there was no stopping her once she had chosen a target. Everyone else's attempts at diverting her assault had failed, and though she could be temporarily distracted, she easily avoided everyone's attacks, and returned to her target.

"Asch!" Luke managed to get in between his sibling and the God-General, parrying her strike. His arms trembled under the weight of her blade. Even he could tell she was skilled.


"Luke!" Asch tried to hurry to his brother's side, but was forced back by a renewed assault.

"Eyes on me," Cantabile taunted. "You know what I'm going to do?" She asked, her voice turning venomous as she continued her relentless assault. Asch was just barely managing to keep up with her strikes. "I'm going to kill your brother. Then I'm going to kill your father, and your mother, and every other fool who has ever so much as smiled and helped you along your way. And then, once Van is done with you, I'm going to kill you too. Then... this world that scum like you lives in can go. I'll get rid of it all with my own hands."

"And what do you think that will accomplish?!" This time it was Guy who intervened.

"All those that died needlessly that day will finally be able to rest in peace. I will see an end to all those who slaughtered my people, simply because the Score said so!" Cantabile said allowing herself to be drawn away by the blonde's assault. Natalia wasted no time healing the wounds Asch had compiled. Off to the side, Tear had managed to get Luke back on his feet, after treating a head injury among other things. Tear knew better than anyone that Cantabile was not someone to be trifled with.

"But why?" Tear called out, unable to let go of her former teacher's answer. "Why would you want such a thing?"

"I wouldn't expect you to understand Tear. You were too young; you didn't see the bloodshed, the murder that these people wrought upon the innocents of Hod. But I remember it, I remember it all. For my mother, my father, and for every other life that their family stole from this world, I will not rest until I see both of them dead!"

"But what does that have to do with destroying the Score?" Tear demanded. It was taking a great deal of energy to balance her conversation with Cantabile and her healing. She was grateful for Natalia's assistance with the latter, though it served simply as a reminder of how weak she had become. Why were her emotions so difficult to keep at bay? Was it because it was Cantabile? The woman she had always seen as a big sister now had no desire other than to destroy the people Tear now held dear. But why? How had everything come to this?

"The people of this world, all of us, we're nothing but pitiful puppets!" Cantabile shouted as she fended off attacks on several fronts. "We play according to the Score, bending to it's every will, and that will be our destruction."
"What are you talking about?" Anise shouted as she unleashed an arte from the safety of Tokunaga's back. "You guys are the ones who are going to kill everyone and destroy the world by making the land fall!"

"I suppose the Score won't matter much once everyone is dead," Jade pointed out, unleashing an arte of his own. Cantabile swiftly dodged both attempts and continued her assault on Guy and the two redheads.

"That's where you're wrong. The ones who will die are the fools who refuse to let go of a false prophesy. Then the Score itself will be destroyed along with its support, Lorelei."

"You're trying to destroy Lorelei?!" Luke cried in outrage, barely sidestepping Cantabile's answering swing. She used the same style as Guy did, making Luke somewhat familiar with the movements, but her added speed was proving to be quite the challenge.

"Of course, unless Lorelei is destroyed, unless the power to read the Score is gone, the people will never escape it. And even then, they won't let go. They'll still desperately cling to the Score… so they'll go too. We'll remove it all, every trace."

"What point is there in removing the Score, if there's no one left in the world?" Natalia demanded.

"But you're wrong; there will be people in the new world! The people can be replaced by replicas, just as the world will be; replicas that will know nothing of Yulia's poison, a pure world."

"How can you say that?!" Tear cried, clearly no longer in control of her emotions. Her voice trembled as she tried one last time to reach out to her former mentor. "Replicas are worthless, they don't mean a thing! They can't bring you any happiness!"

"I thought you of all people could understand this," Cantabile said disappointedly, halting her assault. "After all it was your homeland too. It was your brother they forced to destroy it!"

"What?" Tear took a step back in pure shock. "What are you talking about?"

"Didn't know that? Did these scum never tell you? Hod was abandoned after all, the Score said it was to fall, so anything and everything was fair game. Both countries moved right in like it was there own personal laboratory and all of us were their personal lab rats. Your brother was singled out because he was such a capable Seventh Fonist. It was the hyperresonance experiments they put him through that eventually cost Hod its life. Ironic isn't it? The very people who acted because of the Score made it come true. I'll never forgive them; I'll never forgive any of them! And I will live to see the day they're all dead!"

"You would really do that?" Guy asked the girl who had once been his close friend, the girl he had once hoped would be part of his future. She couldn't seriously mean that… could she? "You don't seriously think that killing off the entire world and replacing it with a huge replica is the answer, do you?"

"I would do anything to have Hod back." Cantabile's voice was laced with venom and sheer determination. Not one of them doubted that she would see this plan of theirs through to the end, even if the rest of the world had to die for her to get it.

"Eyes on me!" Asch attacked from behind, landing a hit to the God-General's right leg. Though it certainly wasn't a mortal blow, it was deep enough that it should at the very least slow her down. Jade saw the advantage and landed a similar hit on what seemed to be her dominant arm. Cantabile may possess some healing skills, but a blow to the joint like that would take awhile to heal, even if
a Seventh Fonist were doting on her.

Cantabile muffled her cry as the hits landed, refusing to show her enemy any signs of weakness, but even she knew this fight was over. If she didn't retreat now, it would cost her her life, and that was something she refused to give up right now. Not with the Fabres on this side of the ground, not with Van's plans still incomplete; she couldn't die yet.

"Don't think you've seen the last of me," the God-General declared, and with one last burst of speed, vanished into the ruins.

"That must have been painful," Asch commented as he sheathed his sword. "Those weren't grazing blows."

"Pity she hadn't stuck around," Jade said as he put his own weapon away.

"She's not stupid like you old man, if she had stayed she would have been killed."

"Like I said, pity."

"T-Tear?" Luke hesitantly approached the melodist. She hadn't said a word since Cantabile had told them all that stuff about Master Van. That couldn't have been easy on her, but at the same time, Luke was afraid of how she was going to react. She would never actually join Master Van though… right?

"I…" Tear said softly, her voice trembling.

"It's alright Tear," Luke put a comforting hand on her shoulder, even though he wasn't really in the condition to do much comforting. Tear had him petrified.

"I hate fomicry!" Tear yelled into the empty cavern, her voice bouncing back to them and repeating her frustration. "How many more people do I have to lose… to that wretched technology…" she trailed off. Luke stood frozen at her side for a moment, then hesitantly retreated. He just couldn't…

"I know how you feel Tear," Guy spoke up, seeing just how bothered Luke was. "But aren't you being just a bit unfair? I mean, it's not like fomicry has forced them to do what they're doing."

"But you can't deny that if fomicry didn't exist, all this wouldn't be happening. There wouldn't be any way to recreate the world, no reason to destroy it. There's no place for fomicry in this word."

Guy retreated, deciding that pushing the issue may be the more harmful of the options at the moment. But man, poor Luke; no wonder he had a complex about being a replica with Tear acting like this.

"I wonder if her being here has anything to do with Chesedonia falling," Ion wondered.

"That's hard to say," Anise replied. "I mean, she sure acted like she was here for you and her happy family over there," the Fon Master Guardian nodded towards Guy and Tear. "But there's no saying what she was really doing here."

"There's only one way we're going to find that out," Asch said as he began down the path. "Let's hurry ahead to the passage ring."

"As much as I'm enjoying the sights, I'm going to have to agree," Jade pitched in. "We'll have plenty of time to contemplate these matters later, for now let's ensure the safety of Chesedonia."

The passage ring was just like all the others, and it seemed that no matter how dire the circumstances were, they never failed to instil a sense of wonder in Luke. They just seemed so... peaceful and calming. Luke really wished he could have a chance to visit one when thousands of lives didn't hang in the balance, then maybe he could enjoy them properly, as he was sure Yulia had intended them to be.

The walk down here had been anything but peaceful though. No one had said a word since their encounter with Cantabile and the silence made Luke want to scratch his ears out. He just couldn't stand the tension! And yet, at the same time, he wasn't going to be the first one to say something. His emotions were still in disarray after Tear's statement. He had quietly hoped that as time went on, her hatred of fomicry would taper off a bit, but it was still very much alive and as strong as, if not stronger than that fateful day in Ortion Cavern. He just… he just didn't know what he would do if she found out. He didn't want to lose her, he just couldn't lose Tear.

"Tear, if you would." Jade was the first person to break the awkward silence once they had made it down to the passage ring itself. Tear obediently walked over and activated the ring, bringing up a myriad of glyphs on the ceiling.

"Well looks like Van's been a busy little boy," Guy commented noticing an additional two red rings above and beyond the ones he'd been told about. "Do we know where those ones are?"

"I can't tell," Asch replied. "How about you, old man?"

"No, I'm not sure either," Jade replied half-heartedly. Something was drawing his undivided attention. Just how bad had things gotten since Shurrey Hill?

"How do things look?" Ion inquired after several moments.

"Not good, I'm afraid," Jade replied, his eyes still glued to the ceiling.

"So we can't save Chesedonia?" Anise guessed.

"Oh, it's much worse than that. It seems as if the Sephiroth have reached some sort of critical point; their power is completely out of control. At this rate all of the passage rings will break and the outer lands will crash."

"So all of the Outer Lands will end up in the Qliphoth?" Tear asked.

"Worse than that," Asch spoke up. "If the passage rings break, any of the lands set to float on the miasma will sink. Without the passage rings, there won't be any Sephiroth at all, not even to keep the lands afloat."

"That's terrible! Isn't there anything we can do?!!" Luke said in a panic.

"About the Sephiroth going out of control? Not much from here," Asch replied disappointedly. "I'd still like to try and do something about Chesedonia though."

"Asch is right," Guy agreed. "Even if it's a temporary fix, we need to try and do something for the people of Engeve and Chesedonia."
"Hmm," Jade silently pondered for a moment. "We may be able to lower the land slowly, like an elevator to minimize casualties and injuries, then stabilize it on the surface of the miasma like we did for St. Binah. Keeping it up in the Outer Lands is completely out of the question, I'm afraid. This Sephiroth is too far gone."

"Is it possible to do the same thing for the soldiers on the Rugnica Plains?" Luke asked.

"In theory, yes," Jade replied. "However, I doubt we'd make it back to Shurrey Hill in time."

"Then let's do it from here," Asch suggested.

"Is that even possible?" The younger sibling stared at his brother in something akin to awe. Just how did Asch get all this information?

"Yes, it is, and I can show you how," Asch replied with certainty.

"Wait a second!" Natalia interjected. "You're not seriously talking about putting these lands in the Qliphoth are you?"

"Of course we are," Luke answered.

"What's the matter with you?!

"What's the matter with me? What's the matter with you?" Luke protested when Natalia verbally attacked him. "If we don't do anything the land is going to fall anyways. What's the big deal? It's the exact same as last time."

"No it's not the same as last time! Last time the land we were lowering was going to be evacuated. You don't honestly expect all those people to live in the Qliphoth? Without any sort of protection against the poison? You might as well go kill them yourself!"

"Natalia, stop it!" Asch cut in before Luke could come up with a retort. "You know there isn't any other option right now! Look," the redhead lowered his voice before continuing. "I know this isn't exactly the best situation, but try to look at the bright side. This way we can save the soldiers on the battlefield too."

"Why, so they can slowly suffocate from the poison?! I didn't want to save them like this! No one should have to live like that!"

"At least they'll live," Luke cut off Natalia's impending rant. In spite of her fury, to that statement, Natalia couldn't find a retort.

"Luke's right," Ion agreed, "and as long as you live, you can work towards a better tomorrow."

"Let's get going," Asch ushered Luke off towards the passage ring. "Even Tear's strength won't last forever." Tear gave him a grateful smile, well, as much of a smile as she could manage.

Asch began giving Luke instructions, explaining the finer points of what the younger sibling was going to have to do. Though she had been defeated, Natalia clearly had no intentions of conceding her emotions on the subject, and was making her feelings obvious with the dirty looks she sent in their direction. If only…

Natalia struggled to make sense of the thoughts that flew through her mind, as she watched Luke's hyperresonance. The script that imposed itself upon the complex glyph glowed softly and Natalia allowed her mind to follow it. She could pick out bits and pieces of the commands, but it was
otherwise too complex for her to follow in Ancient Ispanian. Since when was Luke so fluent in Ancient Ispanian anyways? When had he become so stubborn, unwilling to listen to reason? It bothered her, it bothered her far more than she cared to admit.

Why was he destroying so many lives? First it was Akzeriuth, and heaven forbid should she ever say such a thing. After all, Luke was supposedly completely innocent in that regard; as if Luke couldn't make decisions for himself. Why should he alone not have to accept the consequences of his actions? Then of course there was the war, she could find cause ten times over to blame their lack of intervention on that front on the younger redhead.

It frustrated her so! Why did everyone dote on him like he was the center of the universe? Honestly, he was just a child! A seven-year old! He shouldn't even be accompanying them, much less be given the fate of the world as his plaything! He had absolutely no appreciation for the consequences of what he was doing. All he cared about was the here and now, and how he could make himself feel better; how he could force his way into a world in which he did not belong.

"Impressive work," Jade commented once Luke had finished.

"What now?" Luke asked. He didn't have to wait long for an answer, no sooner had he spoken than the entire cavern began to shake.

"The land is lowering at the moment; I suggest we wait here in case there are any unforeseen problems. You can let go over there Tear," the Colonel added, noticing how drained their companion seemed.

"Thank you." Tear let go of the pedestal and came over to join the others.

"So was that the product of your recent 'information raid' on Daath?" Jade's question was directed at Asch.

"That's right," the redhead confirmed. "I'm willing to bet that's how Van's been operating all the passage rings without the Sephiroth being open."

"Ah, I see. Not a bad theory. It would explain how he's accessed passage rings that haven't been opened yet. Though I wonder, there are still the Yulian Seals, how is he bypassing them?"

"Maybe you only need to break the seal to operate the passage ring?" Guy suggested. "Once it's broken at one passage ring, you can operate any of the Sephiroth from there. I don't know…it would be handy in an emergency, but it's quite the flaw in security."

"Wait a sec," Anise piped up. "If Van can access all the Sephiroth from one passage ring, why hasn't he dropped the Outer Lands already?"

Before anyone could formulate an answer, Tear began to cough. It seemed innocent enough at first, as if something had gone down the wrong way, but it quickly turned into a fit of hacking that brought the melodist to her knees.

"Tear! Are you alright?" Luke hurried to her side, his concern easily washing away any apprehension over recent events. Tear tried, but couldn't manage to bring up words between fits of coughing. Luke found himself unable to do anything but brace the melodist. Then suddenly, a wave of dizziness swept over him.

"Easy Luke," Asch rushed to steady his sibling who had knelt down beside Tear. Luke accepted Asch's support. "Are you okay?" Luke shook his head, as if to shake off whatever had just come over him.
"Yeah, I'm just kind of worn, that's all. That took a lot more out of me than the others did."

"There you are Anise, there's your answer," Jade replied.

"What are you talking about old man?" Asch asked as he helped his sibling and the melodist, who had managed to get her coughing under control, to their feet. Tear still didn't look very good. Had it really taken that much out of them?

"It may be a simple matter of effort," Jade explained. "From the looks of things, operating passage rings at a distance requires a great deal of energy. That could be what has been slowing Van's progress, especially if he needs time to recover between attempts."

"But what is he doing?" Guy inquired. "I mean I know he needs room for this replica world of his, but it just seems off to me. I mean, couldn't he have just ordered the lands to crash, or shut off the Sephiroth? It seems like there's more to this."

"Fomicry requires a large amount of Seventh Fonons," Jade speculated. "I wonder if he's been diverting the fonon flow to provide for his fomicry experiments. To pull off something on the scale he's been considering, I can't imagine any other suitable source, unless he was to harness the Planet Storm itself. Of course… this is all pure conjecture at this point. Until we've confirmed it, we should be cautious not to take it as factual information. We may be completely wrong. Do remember that we've only successfully connected Sephiroth that had already been activated."

"No matter what he's doing… we have… we have to stop my brother," Tear managed, still leaning on Luke for support. "We have to stop him and his fomicry... before it's too late."

"Tear's right," Luke agreed. "We can't let things go on like this."

"Yeah, but what do we do?" Anise inquired. "So far all we've been doing is reacting to everything. Exactly how are we supposed to go about stopping the Commandant?"

"Point taken," Guy said while pondering possible solutions. "What we really need is more information."

"Perhaps we should pay Belkend a visit and see what we can find out about the fomicry project Dorian General Grants has undertaken," Jade suggested. "We can also do some research on the miasma while we're there."

"Do I need to remind you that Belkend is one of Van's strongholds?" Asch brought up.

"Then I guess that means we'll have to walk a ways," Jade replied with the traces of a grin. "We'd hate for them to be alerted to our presence."

"Yeah, whatever old man." Asch rolled his eyes. "Hey Tear, are you okay?" Asch asked as he noticed the melodist swaying.

"Whoa," Luke caught Tear as she fell forward. "Tear, are you alright? Tear!"

"It seems she's just passed out." Jade did his best to appease Luke's worries. "Perhaps it would be for the best if we avoid operating multiple passage rings in the future."

"I'll agree with you there," Asch conceded. He could still sense the pure exhaustion that Luke was trying to hide. It had been a lot harder on both of them than anyone thought it would be. Then again, all things considered they had just lowered a good portion of the world safely into the Qliphoth. Asch was impressed with his sibling for managing such a feat. Silence fell over everyone
as they patiently waited for the land to finish its descent.

"Hey Natalia," Guy eventually spoke up, noticing just how upset she seemed. She wasn't...crying was she? "Are you okay?"

"No! No I'm not okay! None of this is okay!"

"Natalia..." Asch's attempts to comfort his fiancée were lost to Natalia's steadily climbing voice.

"How many people do you think we've just sentenced to death?! How many lives have we destroyed? People aren't supposed to live in the Qliphoth like that! Now what's next? We lower Kimlasca too? Then just sit back and watch as everyone slowly suffocates to death?! In a year most of those people will be dead. Dead! Those lives are on our hands!"

"Well until we find a suitable alternative, I'm afraid they'll just have to find a way to deal with it," Jade stated, making no attempts to hide his annoyance at the Princess' complaints.

"Natalia, look-" Asch began.

"No Asch! I will not look! I'm tired of being told everything will be okay, that everything will be fine. It won't! Can't you see that? What if there isn't a way to raise the land again? We'll have been the ones to destroy the world!"

"If we can't raise the land then we'll find a way to get rid of the miasma," Asch replied.

"Yulia couldn't do anything about the miasma! Just what do you think you'll be able to do?!"

"We'll figure something out. Just because we don't know now, doesn't mean there isn't a way," Asch said, his voice strained.

"No! I'm tired of always being dismissed and ignored! Look at what's happened! First the war and now this! And don't tell me there was no other way! If you had so much as listened to me, we wouldn't even be in this mess! If you hadn't ignored your obligations to your country none of this would have ever happened!"

"You think I don't know that?!" Asch's eyes betrayed just how deeply Natalia's words had penetrated. "You think..." Asch continued, his voice now barely a whisper. "You think I don't know this is all my fault? That all this is my responsibility."

"If you knew, why didn't you do anything about-" The rest of Natalia's line was cut off by Luke who landed a sharp blow across Natalia's face.

"Luke!" Asch yelled, outraged at his brother's actions.

"I don't care Asch, enough is enough! We all know how hard you've been working, how worried you've been about everything going on, and it's about time Natalia realized that too!" Luke turned to Natalia whose hand rested over the cheek where Luke slapped her. She didn't have to say a word, she was positively livid. Luke, however, wasn't in the least bit deterred; it was one thing for her to be mad at Luke himself, but to attack Asch, after all that he'd done, after all those nights he lay awake worried about her... How dare she.

"No matter what we do, nothing is ever good enough for you! It's always has to be your way, as if you're completely infallible. Well guess what, if we had done thing your way then everyone would be dead right now." Luke continued before Natalia had the chance to retaliate. "You constantly criticize every move we make, well I don't see you doing anything about the situation going on!"
"Come on Luke," Guy attempted to intervene. "You're really not being fair. It's not Natalia's fault we've been dragging her around and keeping her from Baticul."

"I don't care," Luke replied. "And I won't take it back. Natalia is just being selfish."

"Selfish?" Natalia's outraged response finally came. "I'm being selfish? That's funny, last time I checked I wasn't the one being selfish here."

"What do you mean by that?" Luke demanded.

"Aren't you having fun?" Natalia continued in a mocking tone. "Enjoying being useful with these passage rings, enjoying the praise you always get every time you've sentenced another city full of people to death? You make me sick! You never look for any kind of alternative to lowering the land! Why? Because you want to feel useful, you want to feel important! You don't care about the consequences of what you're doing. People's lives are not your plaything! This world is not your toy to do with as you please, I don't care how much praise or satisfaction you may get out of it! Stop trying to force your way into a world where you don't belong. Asch and I have a country to look after. People who don't understand should just stay out of it."

To that, no one could come up with an answer.

"Well," Jade was the first to break the tense silence that had fallen over everyone. "Seeing as the land has descended without any problems, I suggest we take our leave, before the yelling brings the entire desert down on our heads."

"I think that's a fantastic idea," Guy agreed with all the fake cheer he could muster. With Asch's help, Luke managed to get Tear on his back, and both boys were ushered out of the passage ring with Anise and Ion in tow.

"Well Princess," Jade's voice seemed to echo in the silence. There was no hiding the fact that he was clearly displeased with her, even more so than before. "Now that you've done enough collateral damage, I suggest you get going." It clearly wasn't a suggestion. Natalia didn't care; she didn't care what any of them thought right now.

She didn't regret any of it.

Not a word.
Princess

The fire before him crackled, sending dim embers into the darkening sky. Luke tossed the last branch onto the weakening flames and clutched his jacket. He regretted changing out of his warmer outfit back in Chesedonia, but all things considered, he probably wouldn't have survived their desert adventure if he hadn't. He did get some comfort in knowing that, since his sibling had done the exact same thing, he was probably just as cold.

Luke was tempted to head back to the Albiore and get something a bit warmer, but he didn't want to leave Tear and Natalia alone when he'd been asked to stay with them. It had been so close to nightfall when they reached the port north-east of Belkend that they decided to camp a couple hours outside the city and make the journey in the morning. Jade was being extra careful to try and stay under the radar. Not surprising given they were heading straight into one of Van's strongholds, which was probably the reason he'd been asked to stay with the two girls. So even though being in Natalia's company was awkward at best, he didn't want to leave; especially with Tear sound asleep just a few feet from the fire's glow.

Poor Tear… she really wasn't doing well. Though Luke seemed to have recovered easily enough thanks to a quick nap on the way here, the melodist didn't seem to be recovering as aptly as he had. It probably didn't help that she had been sick several times on the way back out of the ruins. Ion thought that maybe she had caught some kind of stomach bug, but none of them could see how or when. After all, she hadn't been sick at all before, and no one else was feeling bad. At least she had been able to keep her supper down, but she had fallen asleep right after that. They could only hope she'd be alright.

She had a lot dumped on her all of a sudden. They all had. Between Cantabile's revelations about Van and finding out about the Sephiroth, everyone had a lot on their mind. Just what did Van hope to accomplish by destroying the Score and eliminating the Outer Lands? On their journey through the Qliphoth, Jade had confirmed what they had learnt at the passage ring. Everyone had seen it, blinking lights that were fading in the distance. The Sephiroth were dying, and there wasn't anyone in the world who could escape it. He just wished he knew what to do to save everyone.

"Luke," Natalia spoke up, interrupting the steady crackle of the fire.

"What is it?" Luke replied, poking the fire with a branch. He refused to look her in the eye. Natalia let out a sigh; it was unlike him to hold such a grudge for so long. At the very least he'd pretend everything was normal.

"I…" Natalia hesitated as she eyed the sleeping melodist. Luke noticed this and it caught his interest. What was Natalia trying to say? Tear rolled over in her sleep and the Princess let out another sigh. "There's something I'd like to talk to you about… privately."

"Okay… well go ahead. I'm sure Tear isn't secretly listening," Luke answered.

"No, the others are due back any minute now." Natalia shook her head. "Do you remember the small clearing we saw on the way here?"

"You mean the one just a few minutes back?"

"Yes, would you meet me there later? There's something I really need to talk to you about."

"Sure…" Luke eyed the Princess suspiciously but before he could question her strange request,
Asch and Guy returned with more firewood. Not far behind them were Jade, Anise and Ion who returned with water from a nearby spring, and once everyone was back, the chatter quickly erupted around the now blazing fire. Only Natalia remained silent, her gaze lost in the flames. Luke couldn't help but watch her and wonder what was on her mind, and exactly what she could possibly want to speak to him about.

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At least it wasn’t a prison cell. But that was about all Natalia could find to be cheerful about her current predicament. She was being held against her will, in Daath of all places. No doubt some scheme on Mohs behalf, trying to drive Kimlasca to war given the recent disaster in Akzeriuth. But her father wouldn't be so easily lured, and she would hurry back home as soon as she could. Then she’d put that wretched man in his place.

Natalia sat down on the couch and simply stared at the ceiling. It was dreadfully boring in here, and it frustrated her. There was so much she had to do, so many responsibilities that beckoned to her, and yet she was forced to do absolutely nothing, trapped in this room. The creaking of the door caught her attention.

"Dorian General Van Grants!" Natalia stood up when she noticed who the intruder was. "What do you think you are doing? Where were you in Akzeriuth?! You were supposed to be assisting with the evacuation efforts and yet you were nowhere to be found!"

"Calm down Princess," the Commandant replied. "I came here to speak to you about that, among other more pressing issues."

"More pressing issues? Why don't you release me? And release Asch! You have no reason to be holding us here!"

"That, I'm afraid, I can't do anything about. You're being held under Mohs' orders. I don't have the authority to release you."

"Then why are you here?"

"I simply came to talk. I'd like to talk with you about Asch, about Luke, about Kimlasca, and maybe even a little bit about yourself."

"About me? What are you talking about?" Natalia sat back down on the couch and Van sat himself down across from her in a matching chair.

"There are several matters of concern both in regards to Kimlasca and in regards to you, but first you seem to have some concerns regarding recent events, shall we take care of those first?"

"What happened to you in Akzeriuth? We met the men that had accompanied you, but you were nowhere to be found."

"I was in the deeper tunnels searching for survivors."

"Then how did you escape when it fell?"

"That was a matter of pure chance. When I found out what Luke wanted to do, I tried to talk him out of it, but he wouldn't be dissuaded. So instead I returned to the surface to try and get as many people out of there as I could. Unfortunately, the only person I managed to save was Asch. Though I'm grateful for that much, I only wish I could have saved more lives."
"Asch didn't seem very pleased about your actions."

"That is likely because we share different opinions on what transpired in Akzeriuth. Asch refuses to believe that Luke is behind everything, and I don't doubt Luke is encouraging that opinion in his own way."


"Now don't be so harsh with him, he's still a child after all. Unfortunately that alone does not excuse him of his actions."

"No, certainly not," Natalia agreed. "But what urgent matters bring you here to discuss this with me?"

"I'm afraid that Kimlasca is in grave danger."

"In danger? What do you mean? What kind of danger?"

"A kind of danger that could cost the entire country and its people their lives."

"How do you know this?"

"It's written in the Score," Van replied.

"Impossible! The Score promises Kimlasca prosperity, not destruction! We would know if there was a problem!"

"Not all portions of the Score are shared Princess, I'm sure you're aware of the Closed Score. And of course there is still the fact that we don't know the entire Score. We don't know anything beyond the Sixth Fonstone, now do we?"

"You mean to say there's something on the Seventh Fonstone? About Kimlasca?"

"Yes, Princess, and it's in danger," Van confirmed.

"But how do you know this?"

"I'm afraid I don't have the time or the luxury of getting into the details of that with you at this time."

"What can we do? What's going to happen?" Natalia was bordering on panic.

"Don't worry about it. I am going to do my best to try and protect Kimlasca. But to do that, I need Asch's help."

"Asch? Well then why don't you just ask him? I'm sure he'll be willing to help you save his country!"

"But he won't. I have tried asking, several times, and he continues to refuse," Van explained.

"That's ridiculous, of course he would help! Asch would do anything to protect Kimlasca!"

"He won't; because there's something that's more important to him than Kimlasca."

"What? What could possibly be more important than protecting his country?"
"I think you already know the answer to that."


"That's right. I suppose it's no surprise he doesn't want to abandon his little brother, but he simply won't see reason."

"It's not possible. Luke may be important to him, but Asch would never endanger an entire country for the sake of his own brother!"

"I can understand how you don't believe me now," Van replied calmly. "After all, you haven't seen the things that I've seen. But just you watch, watch how things will play out from here on out. You'll start to see it. Asch would sacrifice anything, including your country, for that boy, that... replica."

"But," Natalia spoke up after a moment, "what do you want from me?"

"Right now, nothing. I just wanted you to be aware of this problem we face, perhaps you can think of a way to solve it. You know Asch better than anyone; after all you're both to rule Kimlasca together."

"That's right! We are to rule it together some day. It's our job to protect it! Alright, leave Asch to me then, I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you, princess," Van said with a grin. "In exchange let me tell you a secret that's been kept from you. Something about your past that you may not know..."

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The small clearing was dark, but it was still possible to see given the last remaining traces of sunlight that were drawn across the sky. Natalia waited patiently in the fading light. She hadn't specified a time, nor had she intended to. She would wait as long as she had to... that was, if he would even show up. Luke had seen her get up and leave, he knew she was waiting; now all that remained was to see whether or not he would follow.

The more Natalia thought on it, the more she realized how ridiculous she must have sounded, and just how unlikely it was that Luke would actually come and meet her. Especially given everything that had happened and that she had said today. Just what was she thinking, asking him to come out all of a sudden like that? But she didn't have much choice; there was no saying when, or even if such an opportunity would arise again. Everything was already decided; there would be no turning back now.

"What's the matter, getting cold feet over there?" A taunting voice came from the shadows.

"That has yet to be seen," the second voice replied, much deeper than the last.

"Do you honestly think that little of me?" Natalia protested.

"Are you sure you want an answer to that?" The first voice shot back.

"Come on now, Sync, stop harassing her," the second voice spoke up.

"What's this Largo? You have a soft spot for her?" Sync taunted.

"Hardly, but seeing as she's going out of her way to help us, the least you could do is show her some courtesy."
"Yeah, whatever," Sync dismissed his comrade.

"Though, I'm curious as to your answer to Sync's question," Largo spoke up. "Are you sure of what you're doing?"

"Of course I'm sure! You think I haven't seen the same things Van has? I know full well the trouble that our foolish little interventions have caused, and I know what will become of this world if I allow them to continue. I will not see my country covered in poison, my people living in that hellish place! No matter what the cost… Asch… Asch feels the same way, I know he does."

"I'd expect no less," Largo replied, clearly pleased with her answer. "Your determination is admirable. I knew someone like that once."

"Who was that?" Natalia inquired.

"It doesn't matter, she's dead," Largo answered. "She threw herself into the bay and drowned because she lost everything she had ever worked towards. That devotion of yours is a double edged blade, remember that."

"I highly doubt devotion is that much of a flaw," Natalia argued.

"This world isn't quite as kind as you believe it to be," Largo replied.

"It will be. I'll make it that way."

"It's good to see you're so determined," Sync commented, cutting the debate short. "We'd hate for everyone to find out you aren't really the Princess." Sync grinned in the darkness, there was a certain charm to blackmail that he enjoyed. Though the so-called Princess was making it a lot less fun by cooperating of her own will, it was a nice little guarantee that she wouldn't be backing out. After all, it would be such an easy rumor to spread, such an easy life to shatter.

Silence once again fell over the clearing.

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Natalia silently stared up at her home. No… she silently stared up at the castle; it may not truly be her home. The young princess swallowed her nervousness and made her way in through one of the servant's entrances around the side. It wouldn't do to draw unnecessary attention, not now. She felt bad coming here after Asch had asked her not to, but she hadn't technically lied to him. She had promised not to go see her father, and she had no intention of attempting to do so. But there was someone else here she simply had to see. She had to know…

Had what Van told her really been the truth? Was it true that she had been ripped from her mother's arms and been given to the queen in consolation after the real princess had died? It just couldn't be… her entire life couldn't be lie. She was more than some mere replacement! She just had to be.

"Princess Natalia!"

"Shush, Nanny," Natalia silenced the woman who now had her locked in a firm embrace. "I'm not supposed to be here."

"But you're alive! I… Everyone… we all thought you'd died! I'm so happy; your father has been in despair since we received the news about Akzeriuth, he'll be ecstatic to see you're well!"
"I'm so sorry to worry you. I can't go see father right now, but I'll be returning with Asch and the others later. I'm only here now because there's something I need to ask you."

"Of course, I'll be happy to help you in any way I can, Princess."

"You've known me since I was little, correct?" Natalia asked once she'd detached herself from her nanny.

"Ever since you were a little baby."

"I heard something during my travels, I was wondering if you knew anything of it," Natalia hesitantly continued.

"My goodness child, what's the matter? What did you hear?"

"Is it true... that- that I'm not really the princess?"

"Who told you that?" The nanny stepped back in surprise, her reaction betraying the answer.

"It's true... isn't it?"

"Princess."

"Don't call me that," Natalia cut her off. "Do you know anything of my true parents?"

"Your father would be heartbroken if he heard you say that," the nanny replied.

"Does he know?"

"No, or at least, not to my knowledge. You were given to Her Majesty when her daughter was stillborn. It is a secret few of us know. As for your birth parents, all I know is that your mother, my daughter Sylvia, died many years ago. I don't know what became of your birth father."

"Thank you," Natalia replied and turned to leave.

"Wait, Princess. Will you not see your father? Even for a moment? He would be overjoyed to see you, I know he would."

"No, I can't... I have things I must think about. Thank you... nanny."

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"You won't have to resort to such means," Natalia finally answered. "I know what I have to do."

Natalia could sense the two God-Generals shuffling impatiently somewhere in the shadows; intuition if you will. She certainly didn't hear a sound, or see anything that could give away their exact position. Just how did a man of Largo the Black Lion's... stature conceal himself so well? It was certainly a testament to their skills. Now if only Luke would come before she had to find some other means of luring him away from the others.

"Hey Natalia."

"Luke!"

"Why do you sound so surprised? You were the one who asked me to come out here."
"Yes, I suppose. I just didn't think you would actually come. You came alone too," Natalia said, somewhat shocked that he had heeded her request so easily. She had honestly expected to see Asch or even Guy in tow, and had planned for just such a thing.

"You're the one that wanted to talk, so just get on with it. The less time we're out here alone, the better."

"Luke…I…" Natalia hesitated for a moment. What was she thinking? It was far too late to back out on her decision now. She had decided; known without a doubt that this is what she wanted. This was for her and Asch… for Kimlasca, for their people! Surely even Luke would understand that. So why? Why were her hands trembling so badly?

"Did you want to talk about something?" Luke eyed her impatiently. "Cause if not, I'm going back."

The next thing Luke knew, he was on the ground, a frantic, yet surprisingly strong princess pinning him down. He struggled but her hold was firm. When he tried to get out from under her, she grabbed onto his hair, pulling him back.

"Na-Natalia... Why-?" He managed to choke out before his mouth was smothered by a wet handkerchief.

"Don't you understand?" She sobbed, her eyes gleaming with tears. "If you would just go- if you would just leave- Asch wouldn't hesitate anymore! He'd come with me and together we could save Kimlasca!" Her tears flowed freely now. She could feel him weakening beneath her as the tonic slowly drained his strength. She released her hold ever so gently; she didn't want to suffocate him. She realized now, she didn't even want to hurt him… but he just wouldn't listen! She had tried. Time and time again. There was no longer any other options open to her. She had to do this! "Van isn't as bad as you say he is, he just wants to help. It was our interfering that let things get this bad. He just wants to help protect Kimlasca! If it wasn't for you," she finally managed, "Asch and I... we could help him save Kimlasca! We could protect our country together!"

"Natalia..." Luke's last whispers were lost to the breeze as the drug sapped the last of his strength. Natalia couldn't look into his eyes as they closed… couldn't bring herself to watch as he was taken into a world of dreams, dreams laced in sorrow.

"Not bad for a princess," Largo stated as he and Sync moved out into the clearing.

"Impressive," Sync agreed. "How long will he be out?"

"Several hours, at least," Natalia provided as she did her best to compose herself. Her knees still refused to support her weight and she remained on the ground with a pit the size of Baticul in her stomach. "Be careful!"

"Relax," Sync said, his tone of voice bordering on mocking. What was she worried about all of a sudden? Largo had just picked him up. How else did she expect them to move him? "We won't do any more damage then you just did."

Natalia lowered her outstretched hand, and returned to staring at the ground. Why couldn't she shake this feeling? Everything would be just fine. He had promised it would be…

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"Bring him home?" Natalia inquired. She glanced over her shoulder; none of the others were anywhere to be found on the streets of Sheridan, which was fine. The last thing she needed was for
Luke to show up. She just had to get away from them for awhile, she certainly hadn't expected to run into Van, but in the end it was just as well. Natalia had had enough of her cousin and his childish flailing, and she was more than ready to do something about it.

"Yes," Van replied. "I figured that would be the most appropriate course of action. In that way, Luke will no longer be around to influence Asch, and at the same time will be away from any possible danger."

"But this is Luke; you don't honestly believe he'll simply remain in Baticul?"

"That's why I'll dispatch a few of my men to keep an eye on him and make sure he stays there."

"You think he won't notice? He'll just find a way around them," Natalia argued. While she liked the idea of sending Luke home, she just couldn't see how it would work.

"Come now, Princess, you don't think that Oracle Knights are the only people we employ in our services, do you?"

Natalia was somewhat taken aback by Van's statement. What was he implying with that? Regardless... if it was possible then perhaps there was still hope.

"Rest assured," Van continued. "He will stay where he is told. Besides, I'm sure Lady Susanne won't oppose having Luke somewhere safe and sound, now will she?"

"No, she'd be relieved to know he's safe," Natalia agreed. "But how do you plan on getting him there in the first place?"

"That, Princess, is where I will need your help."

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A sound off in the distance brought Natalia back to reality. Both God-Generals were on full alert, and Natalia also turned to look over her shoulder in the direction the voice had come from.

"That's the direction of our camp," Natalia provided. "They're probably just getting loud."

"No," Sync argued. "Someone's coming in this direction."

"Shall we think of taking our leave?" Largo asked.

"I think that would be a wise decision," Natalia agreed. "We don't want anyone stumbling upon us now."

"Nothing we couldn't handle," Sync replied.

"No, none of the others are to be hurt," Natalia argued.

"Awfully loyal to the people you just betrayed," Sync commented, turning in the direction of the camp. Whoever it was was getting closer.

"I did not betray them! I'm doing this for them, so that we can finally start moving down the right path to save this world! That's what everyone-"

Whatever Natalia had intended to say, no one would ever know; because it was in that moment Natalia heard something that made her heart stop.
The voice had finally come close enough for them to hear what it was saying.

"Asch!"

"Asch!"

Luke called into the darkness again. He could feel the presence of his counterpart somewhere nearby, but he couldn't quite place it. He should have known Asch only wanted to switch because Luke's coat was warmer. He was probably off messing around with Natalia, but whatever they were doing, they could do it with out his coat; he was cold dammit.

He still couldn't shake the sense of danger that seemed to have clung to him. Asch's persistent absence had eventually worried him enough to come looking. Asch was more than able to take care of himself, but with Master Van out there doing Score knows what, it didn't hurt to be a little more careful.

Natalia frantically eyed her hostage, still sound asleep over Largo's shoulder. No! This was all wrong! It was Luke! It was supposed to be Luke! It couldn't be Asch... It just couldn't be! But even as she denied it, she could do nothing but stare at crimson of the hairs still laced between her trembling fingers. It just couldn't…

"Well," Sync chuckled with an evil grin. "It looks like this worked out to our advantage."

"No!" Natalia scrambled to her feet but was easily kept at bay by the green-haired God-General.

"Largo, go," Sync ordered. "Take the Sacred Flame with you. I'll deal with the rest."

"What's going on here?" Luke burst into the clearing. He had heard scuffling, and followed the sound, but couldn't quite believe what he had found. What were the God-Generals doing all the way out here?! And Natalia? What were they trying to do?! Where was…

"Asch!" The redhead spotted his sibling. What had those bastards done to him?! Luke drew his sword and in a heartbeat was charging the Black Lion. He didn't care if didn't stand a chance in hell. They weren't going to take Asch! Not while he was still breathing!

"Not so fast!" Sync caught Luke in the chest and pinned him up against a tree. Luke could feel the edges of the bark as the dug into his back, the blood as it slowly trickled along the path down which gravity beckoned it. The small God-General had an amazingly powerful grip that only grew tighter, and he further ground Luke into the tree.

"No!" Natalia ran toward her fiancée. "Give him back to me! Give him back!" Natalia sobbed as she struggled against Largo. Having had enough, and with other matters to take care of, Largo's powerful arm caught Natalia in the stomach and she was sent sprawling across the ground.

"It seems as if your so-called devotion has gone astray," the towering God-General looked down on Natalia who was gasping for air. "Nothing in this world is without flaw."

"Come back here!" Natalia could barely get out a whisper, and the attempt brought on a fit of coughing. But she didn't stop, Natalia called out again and again as she struggled for air. But it did nothing. It did nothing to make Largo stop, nor did it do anything to return Asch to her. Her efforts were completely futile, and the one thing she cared about most, had just disappeared into the shadows.

"You know, it's a shame I have orders to kill you, you make for such a pathetic show; it's almost entertaining." Sync taunted.

"Wh-What?" Natalia struggled to get up, still dependant on a nearby tree to remain standing.

"Even on your dying breaths you grovel for your original. Do you have any idea how pathetic you are?" Sync's hands moved up to Luke's neck. Luke frantically grabbed at Sync's wrists but couldn't make them budge; the lack of air was weakening him. He couldn't... "Maybe it is for the best that you die here, before you spend the rest of your life kissing up to some sorry excuse of a-"

"Liars!" Natalia charged at Sync. The God-General let go of his captive but was easily able to avoid the livid young princess' blows. Luke sank to the ground. "You said you'd take him home! That you would watch over him!"

"You didn't honestly believe all that crap did you?" Sync taunted. "You're just as pathetic as the replica over there." Behind them, Luke suddenly started hacking and gasping for air. "Damn," Sync cursed. "Looks like I didn't quite finish the job."

"How- How dare you!" Natalia continued her frantic assault. Luke grabbed his sword from the ground but only made it a couple steps before falling to his knees. Damn it! If everything would just stop spinning! Now wasn't the time to be feeling weak! He had to save Natalia, and get Asch back! Before they got too far...

"Honestly," Sync shook his head as he knocked Natalia to the ground again. "Come on now, why the struggle Princess? Especially after going through so much trouble to hand him over to us."

Luke froze. What... What did he mean?

"Guys! Are you alright over there?" Another voice in the distance; drawn by the noise no doubt.

"Damn, looks like we're out of time for today," Sync cursed. He wasn't stupid enough to take on the lot of them single-handedly. They had the Sacred Flame; that was good enough for now. There would be plenty of time to arrange the replica's death later. "Have fun saving the world," Sync added before taking of in the same direction Largo had gone. Luke took another couple steps before sinking to the ground. It was impossible; there was no one that could catch up to Sync on foot... and now Asch was... Asch was...

"Asch! Natalia!" Anise called out, being the first to spot their missing comrades.

"Asch? What the- Are you guys alright?" Guy hurried to the redhead's side, more than surprised when he actually accepted the blonde's help.

"Natalia," Tear helped the young princess sit up. "Are you alright? What happened?" The melodist watched the princess in confusion as she collapsed sobbing into her arms.

"What's going on here?" Anise asked, completely dumbfounded.


"Sync? The God-Generals were here? Where's Luke?!" Guy asked frantically as he helped the redhead to his feet. "You're bleeding! What's going on?"

"Luke, what happened?" Jade demanded in the sternest tone any of them had ever heard him use.

"Luke? Whoa, wait, you two switched again?" Anise was taken aback. "Wait... if you're Luke then
where's Asch? Wasn't he was with you guys?"

"Natalia," Luke repeated, ignoring the demands of the others.

"Luke… I'm…" Natalia managed between sobs.

"What did he mean?" Luke enunciated every word, punctuating every syllable with his fury.

"I just… I…"


"Luke, stop it!" Tear cut him off before he could attack Natalia any further. "It's not Natalia's fault, there's no way she could have taken on a God-"

"Shut up, Tear!" Luke in turn cut the melodist off and glared at Natalia. She was not getting out of this one. She was going to answer him if it was the last thing she did.

"Luke… I.. I'm sorry!" Tears streamed down the Princess' face. Her eyes were red and her voice was broken. She was just barely holding herself together. "I… I thought-"

"You thought it was me."

And that was the last thing Luke said before spinning around and storming off into the night.
No matter what direction he looked, everything was black.

Luke once again found himself in the familiar landscape, if you could even call it that. There was no ground, nor was there a sky, just himself lost among the shadows. It wasn't even really darkness, it was nothing, a void, the absence of anything other than oneself, and at times Luke even doubted that much.

Though it was familiar, even expected, the terror that it always brought never changed. He was alone. No one to help him if he needed it, no one to stop him from hurting more people, no one at all. He was alone, and that solitude was what bound him. This was his world, his place, alone in oblivion.

But he couldn't stay here. If he didn't move, he would never save Asch. If he didn't step forward, he may never see his older brother again. So why? Why were his feet frozen to the ground, blocks of lead that refused to budge? Luke was afraid... what if he fell? If he didn't move forward, he couldn't save Asch! But if he fell, what would happen then? There wouldn't be anything to stop him from falling forever, no one to save him. There was no one left to save Asch if Luke fell, but he couldn't if he didn't step forward!

Luke remained frozen to the spot where he stood. He couldn't... he knew he had to, but he couldn't... He had to save Asch, he had to take that step, but if he fell, there would be no hope. No chance of ever saving Asch's life, no hope of ever seeing him again, there would be nothing but death. He couldn't face that... not alone.

Suddenly, Luke began to sink. He struggled frantically, trying to climb out of the darkness that threatened to swallow him. He couldn't fall! Not this time! Too much... too much was on the line! Asch!

But the more Luke struggled, the faster he sank. Darkness no longer surrounded him, and he was sinking into a sea of miasma. Akzeriuth sank around him, dying as he fought for his own life against the toxic sludge. He had to- He had to- He couldn't die here!

Cold flesh brushed against Luke's bare arms sending chills up his spine. Their voices cried out, an eerie sound echoing in the endless abyss. His teeth clenched tightly; ignore it, just ignore it. You can't save them... you can't help them anymore.

Save us.

The rotting hands clutched Luke, restraining his movements. No! He fought against their grip, but his efforts were futile. The dead did not let go so easily. Tears streamed down his face as he fought again and again. There were faces now, so many faces. He could see them all. A mother and her baby, the kids that had played tag, the miners, they were all there and they all sought nothing more than to see Luke join them deep below in the miasma.

No! Let me go!

Come with us.

It wasn't just the people of Akzeriuth anymore. Chesedonia, Engeve, they were all there. All those people, all those people would die, and it was all his fault! But he couldn't, he couldn't give up! He
didn't kill them! He didn't! He saved them, right? He let them live, right?

And for what? To die a slow and painful death…

No! I didn't-

Luke fought and fought and fought but the more he struggled, the stronger their grip became. He couldn't let them- He had to save Asch! He couldn't-

Accept your fate.

Let go!

Come with us.

Luke could no longer move as the toxic sludge came up around his neck. He was drowning! He couldn't breathe! He couldn't- He couldn't-

Luke woke with a start, instinctively sitting up and reaching out for something, anything, and was surprised to find a support within his reach. It took a moment before he was able to catch his breath, but his heart just wouldn't stop racing. Why… why did it bother him so much? He'd been having the same nightmare for months now… so why did it still terrify him as much as the first one had?

"Are you alright?" Guy's comforting voice helped soothe the young noble who was still using the blonde's arm as support.

"Yeah, I just had a bad dream," Luke replied, his voice coming out monotone and distant as he remembered the reality of his current situation. The redhead let go of Guy's arm, wobbling a bit before finally managing to steady himself.

The blonde let out a frustrated sigh. Luke was still upset, not that anyone could blame him, not with what had just happened. In the end it had taken the combined efforts of himself, Ion and Jade to convince Luke not to take off after Asch right then and there. He had eventually agreed to stay on the condition they leave for Daath at first light… but he wasn't happy about it.

That was peculiar in itself, after all, there was no guarantee that the God-Generals were taking Asch to Daath. But Luke was absolutely positive that was where they had to go, and for whatever reason Jade was willing to go along with it. Guy still didn't get it, but far be it from him to argue. He certainly wasn't going to be the one to get in Luke's way. It was probably safer not to test the extremes to which Luke was likely to go to ensure that no harm befall his other half.

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine," Luke dismissed his comrade's concerns.

Guy eyed his best friend, but decided against pointing out that Luke was a terrible liar and that he very obviously was not fine. How could he be while Asch was in the custody of the God-Generals? Especially given the fact they had tried to kill Luke, what could they possibly have in store for Asch? Even Guy was worried; he couldn't imagine what must be going through Luke's head. Was it really any wonder his best friend was having nightmares?

Guy watched as Luke returned to sleep; even he knew that he'd need his strength over the next few days. They all would. Trying to get into Daath unnoticed would be tricky at best, and would involve a lot of walking. Unfortunately, as useful as the Albiore was, it wasn't exactly
inconspicuous. Who else used an air ship? No one. They'd might as well announce their arrival. Guy let out another sigh, returning his attention to the night beyond the fire's glow, all the while listening as Luke returned to a fit of restless slumber.

Luke wasn’t the only one who wasn't sleeping properly… Guy glanced over his other shoulder where Natalia was tossing and turning. Tears were running down her face, and it didn't take a genius to figure out what she was dreaming about.

It would take a genius to figure this whole mess out though; Guy ran his fingers through his hair as he went over everything in his mind again. Nothing made sense and he doubted that it would until they could get all the information.

Natalia had been completely inconsolable and eventually Tear had resorted to singing the princess to sleep, anything to calm her down. Luke refused to talk, though Jade had eventually managed to pry his side of the story out. They would have to wait until Natalia woke up to find out what had really happened. Even Luke only knew what he’d heard Sync say, she was the only one with all the answers. Regardless, things looked pretty bad for her. They all knew that she had been mad at Luke, but this was taking things to an all new extreme.

What could she have been thinking? First of all, she had been out there alone, and without a weapon. It was no wonder she ended up getting as hurt as she did. You would think that she of all people should know better. It would be a lie to say that everyone wasn't upset with her, no matter what reason she may have had, to be willing to hand Luke over to the God-Generals… and when they were planning to kill him… Guy just didn't get it. What were they holding over her head to make her act that way? And yet, no matter how unforgivable it seemed, no one could quite bring themselves to hate her. Whatever she had planned had backfired horribly, and for her, in the worse possible way.

Asch was gone, so was everyone's trust in her. Then there was the fact she could easily be accused of treason by her own country for handing Asch over to the enemy like that, even if it had been by accident. Her friends, her fiancée, and even her country…

She had lost everything.

Hearing what she had to say would be interesting to say the least. Guy couldn't even fathom what may have driven her to such extreme lengths, and an explanation might do some good to resolve the tension involving her continued presence among them. Though he doubted all the explanations in the world would do Luke any good. There wouldn't be any hope of reconciliation for them until they had Asch back safe and sound.

And if Asch wasn't safe and sound… well Guy would rather not consider the implications of that scenario. He had to hope that Van had something in mind for Asch, some reason that he needed him alive.

Because if not, help would come far too late.

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Figuring out where he was wasn't the problem, he knew this place far better then he'd like to. In fact, a holding cell was probably the one place in Daath in which he had spent the most time, including the streets and the inn. It was trying to figure out how the hell he got here that was exhausting his drug-fogged mind. He remembered switching with Luke, then he had stayed behind with the girls while the others got more firewood and water. Everyone had talked around the fire
for awhile, and after that he had gone to meet…

Natalia.

The memories came rushing back once that one fact was solidified in his mind. Her speech, his struggle, the drug-soaked handkerchief…and everything going black, he remembered it all. But why? He knew the tensions between her and Luke had reached an all-time high, but even then, it wasn't like her. But she hadn't been herself for a long time now. She was cold, bitter, angry and always upset. Asch couldn't even remember the last time he had seen her smile, genuinely smile for him. Did she really hate him that much?

She hated him enough to betray him. And that alone was more of an answer than he wanted.

Asch sighed leaned back against the stone wall of his cell, staring out through the bars at the Oracle Knights who dutifully stood guard. They were on their best behaviour too; no slacking off or flirting with the female acolytes, and it probably had everything to do with the fact that Sync was sitting impatiently another ten feet away. From what Asch could make out of his mood, the first guard to do so much as breathe out of line was going to severely regret it.

Asch didn't entirely blame Sync for being ticked off. Guarding a prisoner was not typically a duty given to someone as high-ranking as a God-General, but they had all been taking turns. It seemed that Van refused to let him slip through his fingers again. Well the lying bastard could burn in hell for all he cared, there was no way he was going to join that lunatic on his so-called crusade against the Score.

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Asch slowly stirred, his head was throbbing, and he could distinctly feel the dried blood on the back of his neck. Just where…? What was he laying on? It was… red? Asch clutched his fist to get a feel for the strange red substance, and was rewarded with a loud squawk. They were… feathers? What in all the…

Pain shot through Asch's body, protesting the unwanted movement. He was stiff and sore all over, and his head wasn't the only place he could feel blood. But in spite of the constant throbbing, Asch did his best to gather his thoughts. The last thing he remembered, he had been in the mines below Akzeriuth. He had been running, then he came upon a strange room and…

Luke! Asch sat up so fast, the blood rushed to his head and the ensuing dizziness sent him crashing into the rock ground from the large bird that he had been resting on. He looked around frantically, Luke and the others were nowhere to be found. What happened? What happened to Akzeriuth? Approaching the nearby cliff, Asch found the answer he was looking for.

Though the screams had subsided, several voices could still be heard echoing off the mountains, their dying breaths crying for help. Only a few traces of the once proud city remained, and they too were slowly crumbling, being claimed by the abyss that had opened up beneath them. How… What the hell had he done?!

"Careful," Van's smooth voice slithered into Asch's ears, doing nothing but causing the redhead even more alarm. "Are you alright? You need to be careful, I don't have anything to bandage those wounds, and we don't want you losing any more blood."

"What the hell do you want?!" Asch demanded, backing away from his approaching teacher. "What did you do?!!"
"I saved your life. I barely got you out of there in time. This,” Van waved his arm to indicate the falling city. "This, I'm afraid, is all Luke's doing. He tried his hardest to help, but he was doomed to begin with."

"Like hell it is," Asch shot. "Where's Luke? What did you do to him?"

"I hate to be the one to tell you this, but Luke is dead."

"What?"

"I tried to save him, but I couldn't reach him in time. He fell along with the city."

Asch simply stared at Van dumbfounded. It was a lie, it just had to be.

"How...how the hell did all of this happen?"

"Rather than how, shouldn't you be asking a better question?" Van suggested.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Rather than ask how, shouldn't you be asking why? Why was Luke here in the first place? Luke doesn't have near the experience or the talents necessary to act as an ambassador, at least not in such an important mission. Why were you and Princess Natalia not allowed to come along, even though you had no other duties to attend to? Why was His Majesty so adamant about sending Luke despite your protests? Why?"

"Because..."

"That's right," Van encouraged his student to continue.

"Because of the Score?"

"Yes. The Score said that Akzeriuth would fall. The Score said that you would die. Your father, His Majesty, they all knew this, and what did they do? They sent Luke to die in your place, like some sort of disposable pawn. If it weren't for the Score, then Luke would still be alive. If it wasn't for their idiotic devotion to the Score, Akzeriuth would have been evacuated months ago. But no, everyone was left to die, and now Luke, Natalia, and all the others were forced to pay the price with their lives."

"It's not true," Asch shook his head.

"It is."

"No it's not! You're lying! Luke is alive!"

"I saw him die," Van solemnly told his student. "I would have done anything to try and avert his fate, but even I was too late. I'm sorry."

Asch shook his head in denial. He wasn't in denial of Luke's death, but rather just how blatant Van's lies were. He knew Luke was alive; he could sense his sibling's presence in the back of his mind, and while he couldn't get through to him for whatever reason, he knew that his little brother was most definitely among the living. Did Van honestly think Luke had died...or was he just lying and using the probability to his own ends?

"But I have a way to fix it all," Van continued and Asch listened. Just what the hell was Van trying to get out of him with a stunt this elaborate?
"What's that?"

"Join me. Join me and together we'll get rid of the Score. We can purge this world of the poison on which it has become dependant; a false prophecy that demands innocent lives for no other reason than because it says so. I can't do it without your abilities. Help me build a new world free of such pointless malice!"

"No," Asch refused.

"Why not?"

"I won't meet destruction with more destruction. You're lying to me. I know that Luke isn't dead and if you're lying about that, what else are you lying about?"

"That replica is doomed to die."

"Not if I have anything to say about it!" Asch's expression turned dangerous.

"What do you think you can do against Yulia's Score?" Van challenged his student. "You can't alter it; the only option open to you is to destroy it."

"I won't help you; I don't care what you're trying to do!"

"Fine," Van conceded. "I'll let you go for now. Take that creature there," Van pointed to the bird Asch had been sitting on. "Take it and see for yourself the future the Score has set out for this world. See what it will do to all those you hold dear."

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Was that what this was? The Score's doing? Did the Score tell Natalia to hand Luke over to Van? Was that what Van had meant when he said the Score would ruin the lives of the people he cared about? Did it foresee this chain of events, or did the Score itself make them happen?

It seemed like there was nothing but questions, and with a God-General less than ten feet away, it didn't look like he would be getting answers anytime soon. Was the Score really to blame for all of this? Was that why Natalia suddenly hated him and Luke was keeping secrets? It was destiny; it was unavoidable. Was there really no other future? No future where Natalia got along with Luke, no future where Asch could trust the people he cared about. There was no future in which he was meant to be happy?

Why not? Why didn't he deserve a bright future? Because Yulia decided 2000 years ago that certain people would be happy while others were left to suffer and die? Asch refused to accept that. If that's all the Score is, then screw it altogether. It's not like the damn thing means anything in the first place. He wasn't going to throw away his happiness, his future... for that. Maybe Van didn't have things so wrong after all.

Asch felt his chest tighten, a ghostly hand that clutched his heart and refused to let go. He just didn't have it in him anymore. Weeks of nothing but worrying, frantically searching for answers, compromises, laying awake into the early morning hours trying to make everyone happy... it had all been for absolutely nothing! Look at where it got him. Sitting alone in a cell with the world and everyone he gave a damn about with their backs turned. So what the hell had been the point? Why did he even try?

And for the first time in a long time, Asch allowed despair to claim him. He just couldn't... even he couldn't fight forever... he couldn't fight for nothing.
Not when even Natalia had turned against him.

But Natalia hadn't meant to hand him over. This trap had been set for Luke, and he had been ensnared instead. Not that it really made much difference in the end; the feelings involved were still the same, the betrayal all too real. But what had been the point? What purpose did Van have for Luke? Was it their hyperresonance? It was the only thing Asch could come up with, but it didn't make any sense. If that was the case, why not have used Luke from the start? It would have been ten times easier to get Luke's help before Van had betrayed them in Akzeriuth, but he was the one Van had clearly expressed interest in. So why was Luke the target? Using him as bait seemed pointless if the trap could just as easily have been set for him. Things just didn't add up…

*That replica is doomed to die.*

Could it be… Van wanted Luke dead? That had to be it. Probably in some convenient manner that didn't implicate him in any way. Then he could blame the Score, and get Asch's own cooperation. Asch kicked the bars of his cell in frustration. He would never let that bastard pull something like that off. Just let him try it, it'd be the last thing he ever did. Van could spend seven lifetimes trying, but Asch would *never* trust him again, much less let him near Luke.

But who could he trust anymore? He couldn't trust Van, he couldn't trust Natalia… and if he couldn't even trust his own fiancée, then who was left? Luke? He knew that Luke didn't want him any harm, but even Luke kept his secrets. Though Asch hadn't said anything, he had seen Luke's nightmares that one night; he had been given a glimpse into the nightmarish reality Luke was fighting against. Asch had hoped that if he gave Luke time, his little brother might mention it on his own… but Luke was as secretive as ever. No one trusted him, and he couldn't trust anyone. Was that why he was constantly being betrayed by the people he cared about?

What options were there then? There was no saying who would be the next person to turn them over to Van or even Mohs… that was, of course, assuming he found a way out of this mess. Could he just leave on his own? Take Luke with him and they could take care of Van's plans themselves. It *was* what they had planned to do from the start. Everyone else had gotten involved and were dragged around, some against their will, and look at what became of it.

Things would just be simpler with him and Luke. Even if Luke kept his secrets, at least he knew his little brother would never betray him. They could do it, just the two of them…

Asch stopped in the middle of his train of thought. He threw his head back against the stone wall and in spite of himself he began to laugh. He drew the attention of Sync and the two guards who could only wonder what sort of insanities could spawn such a crazed laughter.

Just what was he thinking? He couldn't just drag Luke away from everyone like that. He may have his problems, but Luke genuinely cared about every one of them. They were his friends, people he looked up to, respected, cared about and trusted. Who was Asch to make him drop all of that on a moment's notice?

But how did Luke do it? Couldn't he see? Jade's cryptic messages never bothered him, Guy's questionable loyalties didn't sit at the back of his mind, and Tear's ties to Mohs meant absolutely nothing. Luke was happy. He was comfortable when he was around everyone, he smiled and laughed along side them, and he enjoyed nothing more than to see them happy, just as they did for him.

But Asch wasn't a part of that. There was still an awkwardness with others that he couldn't explain; a wall between him and the world Luke lived in. Luke was always so kind and so open; willing to talk to almost anyone about anything and everything under the sun. He never seemed worried
about lies and deceit; that someone might be scheming behind his back, patiently waiting until his guard was down. In Luke's world those sorts of things just didn't exist, and when it did, they were dealt with after the fact.

Luke was just an idiot! A... a naïve fool...

Luke lived in his own little world... and Asch wanted nothing more than to be a part of it.

The time that Asch spent pretending to be Luke easily made up some of his fondest memories. It was a small taste of a forbidden freedom. Free from the concerns that always plagued his mind, free of the worry that someone was going to stab him in the back, and for a brief time, all those walls around him came crashing down. Not to have a care in the world, no responsibilities to see to, no need for secrets, lies and deceit... just free to live and love the world for what it was. That was what Asch longed for more than anything.

A freedom he was never allowed.

Ever since he had been old enough to understand what it meant, he had known he would someday inherit the throne. He had been raised a ruler and was taught all the proper mannerisms and skills that would befit one. He never had the time to pursue his own interests, his own hobbies. Politics, history, swordsmanship, mannerisms... there had never been time to learn about the birds that flew through the air or to learn to play the flute. He had been refused before the question left his lips. All his energy was to be put into his lessons, because he was to rule Kimlasca someday, because he was to marry Natalia and because there was no one else who could fill that role but him.

He didn't hate his future, far from it. He had always loved the difference he could make, the power he had to help those who needed it and though it had been chosen for him, he couldn't imagine following any other path. Still... all those days he had gone off to the castle while Luke sat in the yard feeding the birds... he couldn't help but envy him.

Luke had a future of infinite possibilities. He could go where his heart took him and do anything he wanted to do. He wasn't bound by the same chains that kept Asch locked away. Responsibilities, obligations, duties, he wasn't hindered by any of these things... the world was his to discover and conquer.

And Asch didn't doubt for a second that he would.

Luke had grown. How he handled himself in Engeve was proof of just how much he had changed. He had so easily gained everyone's trust, so quickly rallied their support and had been able to save them all as a result. That was something Asch could never do, and he knew it. Though he knew he had the support of his people, he certainly couldn't win over the hearts of others the way Luke could. Asch just couldn't bring himself to open up like that. It was probably the reason he never had any friends of his own.

It was sad, but it was a fact Asch had long since accepted. He had never been able to relate to others, and had quickly estranged the majority of the noble children in those few years after his kidnapping. The only person he ever really had to turn to had been Luke, but Luke was family, and while he cared for him like no other, it wasn't the same. Then there was their group now: Guy, Ion, Anise, Jade... none of them were really his friends, they were all Luke's. Being forced to choose, they would all turn to Luke and Asch couldn't say he'd blame them.

Luke had lost his childish fears and timidity somewhere along the way, and had become so much more confident about his own abilities. Asch was proud of the way he had stood up for himself, but at the same time, he somewhat resented it. Luke didn't need someone to look out for him,
someone to protect him anymore. Asch didn't want that, he didn't want his little brother to grow up just yet.

Because when he did, he wouldn't need Asch anymore.

And that would be the day Asch would have nothing left.
The journey from Belkend to Daath's port took a grand total of two days; two tense, uneasy and painstakingly long days. But they had survived, somehow, and had managed to make it with both Luke and Natalia in one piece. Tear sat patiently, waiting for Ginji to find a location discreet enough for them to land. The poor guy hadn't slept for the whole two days in an attempt to get them here as fast as possible, an act for which Luke appeared to be especially grateful. It seemed as if everyone was worried about Asch.

Luke's concern seemed to have appeased a bit about halfway through the first day, though he was still borderline intolerable. Not that it really mattered all that much, Luke had chosen to seclude himself in one of the cabins for the length of the journey and absolutely refused to remain in Natalia's presence. Tear let out a sigh, perhaps forcing him to listen to Natalia's side of the story hadn't been the best idea after all.

Poor Natalia was still completely broken up about what had happened, but she had finally told them what she knew. It was almost surreal, no one had expected Natalia of all people to have put something like that together. Tear couldn't believe her brother would have used her like that! To twist such honest and pure feelings, a desire to protect the things she cared about, into something he could use… it was unforgivable!

But Natalia's actions hadn't been right either. It had been an extreme course of action and regardless of her good intentions; she had done it behind everyone's backs. No one could say they didn't feel somewhat betrayed by what she had done. In her defence, she really hadn't meant any harm. She had honestly believed the lies Van had fed her, and it wasn't difficult to see how. If there was one thing he was good at, it was taking a single grain of truth and twisting it to his own ends. After all, part of what Natalia believed had been right. The only ones to actually put the land in the Qliphoth… was them.

Still, something about Natalia's actions didn't sit right with Tear. She had come to know the Princess quite well over the past few months and would venture as far as to say that Natalia had become her closest friend. She suspected there was more to this than Natalia was admitting to. Her brother wasn't one to execute a plan unless he was sure it would play out exactly the way he wanted it to. He had something over Natalia's head and she just didn't want to say it. But if that was the case, why hadn't she confided in one of them, Asch even? They could have helped her work things out, it made so much more sense in the grand scheme of things…

But could they really fault Natalia for missing the big picture? Tear couldn't honestly say it was a mistake she had never made. Akzeriuth was a fine example of that, everyone had failed to see it then, and Luke had paid the price. Well…everyone but Asch that was.

Asch… At times, Tear really didn't know what to make of Kimlasca's future monarch. He was very smart, possessed a good heart when he thought no one was watching and had an amazing talent for looking at a situation and assessing all the different aspects and possible courses of action; definitely someone she was glad to have on her side. But sometimes she felt like she didn't really know him at all. There were times, brief moments when his guard was down, that you could catch a glimpse of the person he was, a kind smile, a soft laugh in his sparkling emerald eyes. But for the most part he seemed so… distant, and at times almost distrusting. Tear couldn't deny that he was the one she felt she knew the least, and that was including the rather evasive Colonel.

But Asch meant the world and more to Luke, which wasn't really surprising. After all, the two of them grew up together, they were family. It was how siblings were supposed to be. Family… It
was concept Tear knew so little about. For as long as she could remember Van had been away, returning home for brief visits here and there. The older she got, the less time he spent around, until they had finally come to this. If nothing else, Tear wanted to protect the bond Luke and Asch shared, perhaps solely out of hope that someday she could know what that was like.

Asch was an important friend to her too, she wouldn't let her brother do anything to him; she wouldn't let him do anything to anyone or to this world. If only she could get him to listen to reason, to stop with all his foolish fomicry experiments. Why did he cling to everything that caused him so much pain in the past? What point was there in eliminating the world? Did he hate them all that much? If only he would listen… if only he would stop, then maybe… just maybe, they could be a family too.

"Luke," Tear spoke up when the redhead walked in. "How are you doing?"

"Fine," Luke replied, his demeanour no different than it had been for the past couple days. He seemed almost… distracted, as if he was living in his own little world, and any contact with this one was nothing but a distraction.

"We're almost there," Ginji called back, easily guessing at the reason Luke had finally left the cabin.

"Thanks Ginji," Luke said with a bit more energy than his previous response.

"Are you sure you're fine?" Tear asked once her companion had sat down. "I mean, with everything that's happened lately… you don't seem okay."

"I'll be fine once we get Asch back," Luke answered.

Tear looked at him, and debated talking to him about Natalia. She was sure that if Luke would just let Natalia talk, let her apologize, then they could work things out. Natalia certainly wanted to speak with him; she just couldn't build up the courage to confront him…

Tear hadn't even opened her mouth when she noticed the dangerous look on Luke's face. Perhaps her expression had given away what she wanted to say, but it was clear as day that Luke was nowhere near ready to listen to Natalia, and so Tear let it drop. Pushing it too soon would only make things worse. Hopefully once Asch was back he would talk some reason into Luke. Certainly Asch wouldn't hold it against Natalia forever. Asch had a good head, and could look at something like this objectively. She was sure of it. That was of course… assuming they got Asch back.

"Luke, you know that Asch might not-"

"Asch will be fine."

"We don't know that," Tear replied. She didn't want to push it, but Luke needed to be prepared for the possibility.

"Asch will be fine," Luke repeated with an unusual degree of certainty.

Tear dropped the subject. She could only hope Luke was right.
time before Dist smashed his finger with one of those weird tools he was using and made Asch lose count. Not that it really mattered, it was just a way to kill time and keep his mind from wandering onto more unpleasant things.

It had been almost two full days now, and this wasn't the first time Asch had almost lost his sanity. At least he wasn't being drugged anymore, but at times he almost wondered it would have been more humane. At the very least when your mind spent all its energy trying to figure out which way was up, it was kept ignorant of just how much of its life had been wasted in a concrete and metal box. Asch would have loved nothing more than to find a way to get out said enclosure too, but even the seemingly incompetent Dist had more than enough ability to put him right back where he started. Damn the God-Generals!

He hadn't managed to get useful information from any of them either. All attempts at starting conversations with Dist had failed, and usually ended with some senseless ranting about a childhood incident involving Jade that Asch would have been happier not knowing. Though it certainly gave him some interesting fodder for a later encounter with the old man, that wasn't the kind of information he hoped the crazy researcher would leak. So rather than drive himself even crazier trying to make sense of the narcissist, Asch remained silent as Dist continued to fiddle with some sort of fon machine.

Sixty seven, sixty eight, or was that sixty nine? Asch sighed as he once again lost count. There had to be something better he could do with his time, but sitting around pondering the situation didn't tend to end well and Asch refused to reduce himself to the level he had fallen over the past few days again.

It was soft at first, a dull ache in the back of his mind, but it steadily grew until the pain was all he could think about. Damn it, not again! He'd had more than enough of these headaches over the course of his short and unpleasant stay in the holy city. There had to be a better way for Lorelei to get his attention. But even as he thought it, Asch realized that it wasn't the case. This wasn't the same mind splitting pain that usually consumed him when, what they had determined to be Lorelei, was trying to say something. It was different, still painful, but different and somehow vaguely familiar. What was it about Daath that made his head decide it wanted to explode?

'Are you alright? What are they doing to you?' Luke's panicked voice came across their connection providing a much needed distraction.

'I'm fine,' Asch replied. 'What about you?'

'I don't feel anything that isn't coming from you,' Luke answered, betraying his confusion.

'Ugh,' Asch groaned and threw his head back, smashing it against the concrete slab which served only to make the pain worse. He knew what this was now.

'What is it?' Luke inquired worriedly.

'They read the Score way too often in Daath.'

Luke couldn't resist a chuckle at Asch's comment, though he could sympathize. He remembered what had happened the last time Ion had read them the Score, and he was in no hurry to repeat it.

Asch smiled, Luke's amusement bringing him a great deal of comfort. The past couple days had been far from pleasant and Asch couldn't have imagined how much worse they would have been if it wasn't for Luke. His little brother had spent the entire time with him, his presence a much needed support. They talked about trivial little things, mindless chatter, trips down memory lane, anything
to keep both their minds occupied, and away from the more unpleasant thoughts that went along with the situation they were both in.

But those topics weren't completely unavoidable. Luke had told Asch Natalia's side of the story, though his feelings on what she had to say had been clear enough. Asch didn't blame Luke for being angry, he was mad too. Natalia hadn't meant for Luke to get hurt, but that wasn't what bothered him. Natalia's thinking had been almost on the exact same lines as Van's. Both of them had tried to use Luke to manipulate him, and that was something he couldn't forgive.

For anyone.

Natalia hadn't meant any harm, he could appreciate that. But her actions shot down everything he had been working towards. She couldn't accept his actions as his own, she couldn't accept what he wanted, she couldn't accept him. That was what upset him the most, even after all these years; nothing had changed. He wanted to believe it had, but the truth had been proven to him a bit too painfully. That was why he couldn't just go back, as if nothing had ever happened.

But there was still Van to deal with. What he wanted from all this was clear enough, he wanted Asch. Van needed him, though for what reason Asch still couldn't fathom, but there were a few things that seemed clear enough. Van needed him away from the group, away from his family, away from his life; detached from a world his former teacher saw as a nuisance and willing to do whatever it took to help Van along the way. In that case, was it really any surprise Luke was the target? Asch would be the first to admit that his little brother made all the difference.

Even now, Luke was the only reason Asch even considered rejoining the others. He didn't want to, every essence of his being screamed to be alone. He wanted a place where he wouldn't be betrayed, where he wouldn't be hurt; a place where it didn't matter if anyone acknowledged or recognized him as himself, because there would only be himself, and no one else to confuse or replace him with. But doing that meant playing right into Van's hand, it meant abandoning Luke and the things he had left to care about… and Asch would rather die.

Whether he wanted to or not, he was going to have to find it in him to stick with everyone. As for how much he trusted them, that he would have to see.

'You're thinking too hard,' Luke taunted.

'Well I don't have anything else to do.'

'Fair enough,' Luke mentally shrugged. 'Then what were you thinking about?'

'Stuff,' Asch attempted to dismiss the subject. His reluctance to return and unwillingness to trust the people Luke considered his friends wasn't exactly the best topic for conversation, and alienating Luke was the last thing he wanted to do.

'What kind of stuff?' Luke prodded earning him a mild degree of annoyance from his sibling. Asch should have known Luke would pry.

'Just about the Score,' Asch finally lied. 'And about what Van told me once.'

'You mean about how the Score was going to ruin everyone's life?'

'Yeah, I was just trying to figure out what he meant.'

'I don't get it, I mean, isn't the Score off track already? How could it ruin everyone's lives if it isn't even true anymore? And it's not like Master Van doesn't know that already.'
'Van may know it, but everyone else doesn't,' Asch pointed out. 'If they believe it to be true, they'll still follow it, even if it's to their own end.'

'But then what are we supposed to do about it?'

'Short of proving it wrong, which I know you're not ready to do, not much. And even if we all knew it was wrong and found a way to prove it to the world, people would just try to get it back on track again. People are insecure and fickle; they need something to guide them because they're too afraid of making mistakes. When you look at it that way... I don't think Van is entirely wrong.'

'What do you mean by that?! You're not actually thinking of... of...

'Relax, I'm not saying that what he's doing is right, I'm just saying that the idea behind it isn't as bad as we think. Why should people have their lives dictated by the Score?'

'Well...'

'Think about it for us, had we lived according to the Score, you never would have been born. I would have grown up lonely and bored until I was old enough to go die in Akzeriuth. It wouldn't have made either of us any happier.'

'But there was no way of knowing that,' Luke pointed out.

'That's my point,' Asch replied. 'We don't, we can't know the future for sure until it happens. People are stuck on the Score because it promises prosperity, but what if there's an even greater end down another path?'

'Another path? So like, another possible future?'

'Yeah, I refuse to believe that there's only one possible future. Our choices do mean something. The good... and the bad ones, they all have repercussions.'

'I think you're right,' Luke agreed. 'But I don't think Master Van can see that. Maybe if he could, he would stop all this.'

'No, he wouldn't. It's because he doesn't believe it that he's going to such extreme lengths.'

'But maybe... if we talk to Master Van-'

'Why do you still call him Master?' Asch snapped. He bit his lip, regretting how harsh the words had come out. But he just couldn't take it anymore. Didn't Luke realize Van wanted him dead? Had Natalia's plan gone as it should of, he would have been taken away and killed! What the hell did he think he still owed Van after all that?!

'Because...' Luke hesitantly began. 'Even though he's done things I can't forgive him for, even though he wants me dead... he paused before continuing. 'He still spent all those years teaching me. He still earned that respect.'

'Heh,' Asch smiled in defeat. 'In some ways you're a lot stronger than I am.'

'What did you say?'

'Nothing, but you better go if they're calling for you,' Asch instructed, guessing at the reason for Luke's sudden distraction.

'We'll be there soon.'
'I know you will, be careful.'

'That goes twice over for you.'

Asch returned to staring at the ceiling, returning to the solitude he longed for. There was no one here, no one to hurt him, or betray him; no one to throw salt in his wounds, no one to look at him with hatred in their eyes. There was nothing; nothing demanding his attention, no problems to deal with, no responsibilities to see to, nothing. This is what it could be like, life could be simple. Here he didn't have to face up to others.

He didn't have to face up to himself.

It was everything Asch wished for, it was within his grasp. Nothing was forcing him to return to the others. He could lead a life on his own, where he could discover his own future. A world where no one told him what to do, where he could be free; there would be no one and nothing to hold him back. But… he couldn't. Being alone… was hard. The luxury of hiding from his own feelings, of hiding from the pain and sorrows of the world just wasn't worth it. It wasn't worth the cold, empty feeling that he just couldn't shake off. He was bored… and he was lonely.

*One, two, three…*

Across the room, the door to the dungeon flew open, the resulting noise sending both Asch and Dist scrambling to their feet. Asch sat back down when he noticed the pink-haired figure standing in the doorway. It was just a shift change, but did she really have to slam the door into the wall like that? Arietta must be pissed about something.

"You're late," Dist commented once he had his racing heart under control. Well it wasn't his fault he had dozed off, this time of day was reserved for his beauty sleep! How dare Arietta think she could interrupt it by not relieving him of this ridiculous guard duty on time!

"I don't care if I interrupted your nap," Arietta replied. Yes, she was most definitely upset about something. "My friends were exhausted so we stopped for some rest on the way back. It's a perfectly valid reason, so I dare you to go tattle on me to Sync!"

"I am not a tattle-tale!" Dist protested.

"You are so a tattle-tale!"

"Am not!"

"Are so! You ran straight to the Commandant the last time Cantabile and I borrowed your makeup!"

"That was not tattling, I submitted a formal complaint! You took it all, do you know how hard it is to get that colour?!!"

"Ha!" Arietta pointed her finger at the older God-General. "So you do wear makeup!"

"I do not!"

"Do so!" Arietta stuck her tongue out.

"Oh, shut up!" Dist finally gave in. "But the reason you're always late is those silly birds, let me build you something better, a little more… reliable."
"Not a chance!" Arietta's fury was triggered by the attack on her monster friends. "I'm not some cheap sell-out like Anise is! Besides, nothing you make is reliable."

"Well if you don't want to replace them, then at least let me do some experiments, I'm sure, given enough time, I could find a way to enhance-"

"My friends are fine just the way they are!" Arietta's fist found its way into the man's stomach. "Get out of here!"

Even Dist knew when to retreat, though sadly for him, he chose to do so far too late to salvage his pride. He did, however, heed Arietta's demand and left the room, albeit rather ungracefully and with a hand over his stomach. Just as the door was about to close, Dist peeked back in and decided to make mistake number three.

"Just one or two? They'll be fast-"

"Go jump off a cliff!" Arietta's stuffed animal hit the door a split second after Dist had closed it and taken off down the hallway. The pink-haired God-General retrieved her treasured item before plopping herself down on a seat next to Asch's cell.

"So he really does wear makeup?" Asch inquired after a moment of silence. The question seemed to improve Arietta's mood.

"Every day," Arietta giggled.

"What has you so upset?" Asch continued to ask, hoping that he'd be able to work his way around to a more relevant subject. If only he could get her talking.

"Dist is such an idiot," she grumbled. "He always treats my friends like they're some kind of tool. Now he wants to upgrade them. They're not pieces of equipment!"

"I meant before you were talking to Dist."

"You noticed that?" Arietta glanced over her shoulder and met Asch's eyes. The redhead nodded. "Humph," Arietta turned around again. "Why should I tell you? I wouldn't expect a bunch of lowlife murderers like you to understand."

"Murderers, huh?"

"You killed my mommy! Don't act like you're all innocent!"

"Your mother… was she really that liger in the Cheagle Woods?"

"Of course she was! And you killed her along with my brothers and sisters!"

"So then how did a human child like you end up in the care of a liger?" Asch asked, effectively silencing Arietta. She had expected him to protest like everyone else did, that a liger couldn't possibly be her mother.

"I think I used to live in Hod. It was a place called Feres Isle." Arietta finally answered. Even she didn't really know why she was talking. Maybe it was the silence that beckoned to her, or perhaps because no one had ever bothered themselves to care enough to inquire about the particulars. "I don't remember a whole lot from before, just bits and pieces. I was always with my mommy, and we lived in the forest."
"Is that where you met all your friends?"

"Yep," the memory made Arietta smile. No sooner had the rare smile graced her face, her expression became dark. "Then one day, some men came. They came and they took me away from my home. They said it wasn't right for me to be there, that it wasn't right for me to be with my mommy! They took me away from my home and locked me in a cage! It was cold and dark and I was scared. They used to hit me, and do all sorts of terrible things. Ion was the only person who was ever nice to me!"

"Ion was?"

"He let me out of that terrible place, and he taught me how to understand everyone. He even protected me from the bad people! I would do anything to protect him."

"So is that why you became his Guardian?" Asch asked, entirely out of curiosity, momentarily forgetting why he had begun asking questions in the first place. It was interesting to hear Arietta's perspective after having listened to Anise for so long.

"That's right. I wanted to protect Ion like he protected me. I wanted to help him for all the things he did for me! Then one day, he got really sick. The Commandant wouldn't let me go see him anymore. When he finally got better, I wasn't allowed to be his Guardian! Anise got to be his Guardian instead. I'll never forgive her! I'll never forgive her for taking Ion away from me! She's nothing but a traitor who sucks up to Mohs! I'll never let someone like her hurt Ion!"

"Anise used to work for Mohs?" Asch asked. That was something the young Fon Master Guardian had failed to mention.

"Anise still works for Mohs! Even though Ion is trying so hard to stop him!"

"What are you talking about? Anise doesn't work for Mohs."

"Yes she does," Arietta argued. "She's nothing but his little lap dog. I've heard all her reports. How do you think it's so easy to find you? And last time you were in Baticul? Someone ratted you out, didn't they?"

"You can't prove that was Anise," Asch shot back. He wasn't going to let her trick him. This is what Van wanted, he wanted Asch to think everyone was about to backstab him.

"Fine, don't believe me, see for yourself. But whether you believe it or not, I will come and take Ion back from her. He's been working so hard, and all this time she's been helping Mohs get in his way. I'll never forgive her!"

"Commander Arietta!" An Oracle Knight burst into the room, nearly falling over before standing to attention before the young God-General.

"What do you want?" Arietta demanded. "Can't you see I'm busy right now?"

"But ma'am, your stables are on fire!"

"On fire?! What happened?!"

"We don't know ma'am, but someone saw Dist wandering around there. We think that he-" The guard stopped short when Arietta made a break for the door. "Umm, ma'am, aren't you supposed to be guarding the prisoner?"
Despite her small size, Arietta pinned the man up against the metal bars. "Then you guard him," she said as she dropped the keys in his hand. "And don't you dare screw up! You two!" Arietta called to the other two guards, who happened to be members of her squad, "come with me and help."

"Ma'am!" The two guards followed Arietta out the door.

"Ummmm…" the lone Oracle Knight stood dumbfounded in the exact position Arietta had left him, the flurry of movement a bit too much for him to process. How did he end up in charge of such a high class prisoner? The God-Generals were guarding him for Yulia's sake!

Unfortunately for the young Oracle Knight, Asch wasn't one to miss a good opportunity, and as the inexperienced Oracle Knight stood up against the bars, his back to the prisoner and the keys in hand, he made for a very good opportunity.

Asch unlocked the door to his cell and wasted no time in locating his equipment in the next room. That was easy, the hard part would be finding a way out of the veritable maze that was the cathedral's hallways, preferably before the God-Generals noticed he was missing.

The sun shone down on the water as the waves rolled beneath the ship's bow. A strong sea breeze came up off the water, chilling the many Oracle Knights that were running to and fro across the deck in attempts to look busy. Van just scoffed at their attempt, it was obvious they all just wanted an excuse to spend time above deck now that the sun was finally shining.

The Commandant, however, had little interest in what his men chose to do for the duration of the trip. As long as they were not delayed and everything remained on schedule, they could throw themselves overboard if they wanted to.

"Commandant," Legretta interrupted Van's musings and stood to attention before him.

"How is our progress?"

"The ship is approaching port as we speak, sir. There will be a coach to bring us to Fourth Monument Hill once we arrive."

"Good work," Van replied.

"Thank you, sir."

"How is Cantabile doing?"

"The healers are still working with her, it looks like it may be awhile before she's able to do anything useful."

"There are many ways to be useful," Van said sternly, clearly indicating he was displeased with Legretta's comment.

"You're right. My apologies sir, such a comment was out of line."

"No matter. What of Asch?"

"Dist finished his shift and reported no problems sir," Legretta provided. "Arietta isn't due to report until after we've arrived."
"Good," Van replied. For once, Van was actually impressed with something that Dist had made. Those transmitters were proving to be rather useful, though the reports they brought were almost as surprising. Van had assigned the four God-Generals in Daath to guard Asch because he had expected his temperamental student to do everything and anything in his power to escape. And yet, according to reports, he'd yet to even make an attempt. Perhaps there would be hope yet.

The boy must be quite upset over what had happened, making this a wonderful chance to attempt to reason with him. It was a pity they hadn't been able to eliminate the replica, but perhaps that would be possible before the fool could reunite with its original. Without that influence, Asch should easily be able to see things from his perspective. And that was the key, because Asch would fight until the bitter end for the things he believed in.

Now if only Mystearica could see things his way as well. His inability to get through to her bothered him. He may not have been the best older brother to her, but he didn't want to see her perish with the rest of this foolish world. She of all people should be able to understand the foolishness of Yulia's Score. She just needed to see the world in a different light.

That too could be the fault of the replica. Her closeness to the thing was, in some ways, even more unnerving than his inability to make her understand his ideals. Was that why she refused to sway? Stuck on a lie she was fed by a piece of garbage? That wouldn't do, Mystearica deserved far more than that. She deserved a shining future in a world that wouldn't snuff it out for an broken promise of an empty future. Much had happened between them, but he still wanted to see her happy.

If only she could see that.

"Commandant, the ship is preparing to dock," Legretta interrupted Van's thoughts. "Shall I begin organizing the men?"

"Please do," Van answered. For now, Asch came first. With one of her friends seeing straight, maybe then she'd be willing to start accepting the truth.

"We have a great deal of work to do."

Asch quietly opened a door and peaked out of the room. Another hallway… just great. He was so lost, it wasn't even funny anymore. Everything in this Score-be-damned place looked identical to him. How anyone stayed sane living in a place like this, he'd never know.

After making sure the hallway was empty, Asch carefully closed the door behind him. Pulling out one of his daggers, he made a small notch on the doorframe. He may not know where he was going, but at least he knew he wasn't wandering in circles. Short of having lost all sense of direction, he was doing fairly well. Asch had yet to hear any whispers of his escape, any alarms being sounded; not surprising, seeing as the guard he'd knocked out was now locked in his cell, and there wasn't to be a shift change until later in the evening. So unless Arietta returned after dealing with her stables, which Asch doubted seeing as she was much more likely to be dealing with Dist, he was safe from detection for sometime. Though there were times Asch almost wished he would hear something… anything to reassure him he was within a mile of any sort of civilisation. He hadn't even run into an acolyte. Seriously… did Daath spread out under the entire continent or what?

The lack of windows and amplitude of fon stones lighting the passageways led Asch to believe he was somewhere below the cathedral, but seeing as he was unconscious when they brought him in,
he really had no way of knowing for sure. Oh well, nothing left to do but keep going, and hope to find an exit sometime soon. He didn't fancy trying to meet up with Luke in this veritable maze.

The next door Asch opened brought a surge of cool air and cloud of dust right into the young noble's face. Asch frantically looked around, assuring his little coughing fit hadn't drawn any unwanted attention, but there was no one there. In fact, it looked like there hadn't been anyone in this room for a very long time.

The entire library was covered in dust, some layers thicker than others, but still enough to show no one had actually used the library in ages. The books on the shelves looked even older, and would probably turn to dust themselves if anyone tried to handle them. Faded ink on yellowed papers were scattered all over the place giving the entire room a ghostly look.

At first Asch thought the noises he heard was his imagination screwing with him. A faint creaking of the door, papers blowing across the floor, it wasn't until Asch actually spotted the person that he ducked behind a bookcase. They were quiet; whoever it was knew very well how to go unnoticed. Asch slowly and silently began to move in the direction this person had come from, his ears primed for any sign that they had noticed him. He just had to make it to the door unnoticed, and if not, well then he'd deal with that when it happened.

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Reiner quietly opened the door to the old library and closed it behind him. Why of all places did Dist have to send him here? What he should have done was go to the infirmary and get his boss a couple of icepacks before his lip and eye swelled up too badly. Ligers certainly didn't look like the kind of creatures he'd ever want to mess with. He was terrible with animals, and even worse with monsters, probably one of the reasons he had never applied to be in Arietta's squad.

But rather then let Reiner do that, Dist had sent him here to fetch some kind of book that the Commandant had wanted Dist to go through. While the Commandant's orders were important and all, Reiner wished he could have gotten the icepacks. It would save him having to listen to a crapload of complaining latter about how Dist's beautiful face was ruined. Why did he get the feeling they'd be working on liger poison for the next week? Anything to satisfy that revenge journal of his.

Reiner hurried through the ancient library, moving unexpectedly quietly. The last he wanted was to find out the hard way that this place really was haunted. But that was just a story they told the new recruits…right? He hated ghosts… oh how he hated ghosts. He didn't want to bother them, he just needed a book and he'd be gone! Please oh please don't come out. It was one of those times he was grateful that he'd learned to move silently. The skill was a necessity when working for Dist, that man would explode at anything that moved and had ears if it would listen.

Looking up at the towering shelves, Reiner finally spotted what he had been looking for, a blue book with gold lettering that was unmistakable. Thank goodness it was where it belonged, he didn't have to spend half an hour looking for the thing. Carefully snatchng the text off the shelf so as not to damage it in any way, Reiner hurried back towards the door. He was almost there! Now all he had to do was get the book back to Dist, and then he could finally get around to training for that promotion.

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Damn it! Asch had almost made it to the door when the footsteps began running in his direction. He had been so close to getting out, now he was half a second away from getting caught! With no time to think and the footsteps getting closer, Asch abandoned his hiding spot behind the bookshelf.
just as the man ran by, landing a clean blow to his stomach. Asch spun around, landing a second blow to the back of the head and the man fell to the ground unconscious, dropping the book he’d been carrying.

Asch leaned over, picked up the text and blew the dust from the cover. So this person hadn't been looking for him after all. Better safe then sorry though, at least he hadn't killed the poor guy. Asch looked down at the man he'd crippled, he looked like any other trainee. He must have been sent down here to get this book for one of the older members of the Order. Out of curiosity, Asch lifted the cover and began to skim through the pages.

This was! Asch couldn't believe his eyes, a book like this should have been destroyed ages ago. Many texts had been confiscated and destroyed by the Order many years ago, texts Asch now realized probably spoke of the Qliphoth or other such secrets. This one... if it was what it seemed from the little Asch had read, this was a history of the Dawn Age. Something like this might be able to give them more information on the Sephiroth and how, if they even could, save the Outer Lands!

Asch carefully closed the book and tucked it away in Luke's jacket that he was still wearing. Leaving the trainee on the floor, Asch silently thanked the man for dropping this book into his lap and could only hope that the man wouldn't get in too much trouble.

Mohs fumed as he walked down one of the seemingly endless corridors below the cathedral's main levels, a faithful subordinate in tow. Curse that Van Grants! The manipulative Commandant had become quite the nuisance of late, but he would let it slide for now. As long as things continued to move down the path he was guiding them, all would be well enough. The Score had to be followed, and he would continue to drive those two countries to war himself if need be. The promised prosperity could not be lost, no matter the cost.

"Are you sure?" Mohs demanded a fourth time, stopping in the middle of the hallway. Further down the hall, a door closed. Probably one of the useless acolytes skipping lessons again. The Grand Maestro quickly dismissed it; he had no use for such fools.

"I'm certain sir. Dorian General Grants has Kimlasca's heir in his custody. The God-Generals themselves have been guarding him."

"Curse him for having such a valuable prisoner and not informing me! Has there been no word from Anise?"

"Nothing yet, sir."

"Well once this is done, you send word to that girl that she is to be quicker with her reports! I won't have another close call like when they were in Baticul. She is not to delay those reports again!"

"Yes, sir! I'll relay your message. Every word!"

"Good! Now where is Asch being kept?"

"In the lower half of the eastern cell block, sir!"

"Then let's make haste, this war has been delayed enough as it is. I want you to arrange passage to Baticul as soon as we're done here!"
"Sir!" Both men vanished through a door at the end of the hall.

Once all traces of sound were gone, Asch quietly slipped out of the room he'd been hiding in, and silently made his way in the direction from which the two men had come.

"So does some one want to remind me exactly how we're supposed to find Asch? He could be anywhere!" Anise's voice rang in the cathedral's entrance.


"Sorry," Anise replied mockingly, sticking her tongue out at Luke once his back was turned. Someone was in a rotten mood.

"Anise, do try to be a bit quieter," Ion reiterated the request. "It's very important that we go unnoticed for as long as possible."

"No offence or anything Ion, but you going unnoticed in Daath is about as likely as it is for the twins to go unnoticed in Baticul."

"Maybe, but at the very least, we have to try," Ion replied.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Anise conceded.

"Well then, where do you suppose we start?" Guy asked.

"If he's here, he's probably locked in one of the cells," Tear pointed out. "But there are quite a few cell blocks here and he could be in any of them."

"Let's start with the upper levels and work our way down," Anise suggested.

"No," Luke cut in. "This way." The redhead pointed towards a large door on their right.

"That leads to the levels underground," Tear provided. "The dungeons down there are older, I think we should try the others first."

"No, he's in one of the older ones." Luke shook his head. Asch was nearby, and he was moving. He must have managed to get out of his cell. That made finding him all the more difficult, but at least Luke had a direction.

"You have to admit," Jade piped in, "it would be far less conspicuous if he were to be held away from the usual prisoners. I don't imagine they want the world to know their holding onto Kimlasca's heir."

"Jade does have a point," Guy agreed. "Alright Luke, you lead the way."

"Don't worry," Ion placed a comforting hand on Luke's arm as everyone made their way downstairs. "I don't know how much help my authority will be, but I'll do whatever I can."

"Thank you, Ion," Luke smiled. Ion also smiled, his heart was filled with warmth for the first time since that night. If only he had noticed Natalia's distress sooner, perhaps he could have spoken to her, he could have done something to make a difference. Then there was the fact that it had been Van, and members of his Order that had orchestrated all this. Ion couldn't help but feel somewhat responsible… all the more reason to see to it that everything was set right.
Their footsteps seemed to echo as everyone walked along in silence. There wasn't a single other sound to be heard as Natalia walked along the seemingly endless corridors. It never ceased to amaze her just how intricate the layout of Daath was. It was a wonder no one ever got lost down here. Natalia quickened her pace a bit. She certainly didn't want to get lost… she'd never find her way back without Anise or Ion to show her the way, not that her loss would bother anyone. Luke would probably be happy about it, and she had no one to blame but herself.

The silent tension among the once happy group of friends was heartbreaking, and Natalia knew full well she was the cause of it. She could only hope that once they found Asch, if Asch was - no Asch had to be okay – then everything would get better for them. They would find him unharmed, they… they had to. Knowing what she had done was bad enough; Natalia just wouldn't be able to live with herself if anything had happened to him.

She had let herself be so easily fooled. Misled and manipulated, she had played her part perfectly, and completely willingly. Each of those decisions she had made on her own, and would have staked everything on them. She had, and she lost it all.

Luke was furious with her, and he had every right to be, but she was just glad he was safe. She would have been utterly devastated if anything had happened to him. It still shook her to think how close Sync had come to killing her cousin that night. What if they wanted the same thing with Asch? What if she never saw him again? No, Natalia had to believe that she would because she couldn't break down and cry anymore. She had to right the mistakes she had made, and then maybe someday, she could earn their forgiveness.

Yet, despite how desperate she was to see that Asch was okay, she feared meeting with him more than anything else, except perhaps the possibility that he'd been hurt. What would she say… what could she say? He would be angry, that Natalia had no doubt. She had done such a terrible thing to him, had said all those awful things to him… there were no words she knew to express just how sorry she was. But whatever Asch would say, she could accept; any anger or malice he would direct at her, she would claim. She owed him that much.

Tear placed a hand on the Princess' shoulder and Natalia gave her a grateful smile. Thank goodness for Tear, she had certainly proven to be an invaluable friend throughout all this. While she certainly hadn't spared any of the harsh words Natalia had deserved, she had still been a constant support and had helped Natalia work through her own feelings, as well as build up the courage to do what she knew would be necessary.

The sound of a door closing startled the two girls, and stopped them both in their tracks. Everyone else had stopped as well… it was strange, the sound hadn't been loud enough to indicate someone simply passing through. The door had been closed softly, only the clicking of the latch betraying it. Someone was trying to avoid detection.

Had they been found by an enemy? Luke certainly didn't seem to think so. His face lit right up, quite unlike anything any of them had seen over the past couple days, and then took off down the hallway.

"Luke! Don't take off on your own like that!" Guy called out as everyone began after him. What was he thinking? What if that door they just heard closing was a bunch of soldiers waiting in ambush? But perhaps these things never even crossed Luke's mind; he was looking for his brother after all.

And in the end, it was only fitting he had been the one to find him.

"You're okay!" Mieu squeaked as he leapt forward and clung to the front of Asch's top. The startled
redhead could only stare at the cheagle who crawled up onto his shoulder. It was the first time Asch could genuinely say he was glad to see that little ball of blue fur. "I was so worried about you! And Master was worried, and everyone was worried!"

Asch looked up to find Luke in front of him smiling, a soft accepting smile and in that moment Asch couldn't help but wonder if Luke hadn't known all along. Known about his mixed feelings, his reservations about returning… he had known, and had accepted him just the same. A feeling of relief washed over Asch, and he smiled back. Everyone else gathered around, but no one was quite sure what to say. They all stood there in awkward silence. It was Luke who finally found words. "Welcome back."

Everyone watched, unsure what would come next.

"Thank you," Asch finally replied, wearily eyeing everyone in the group save Natalia who had hidden herself in the back.

This was it, the young princess braced herself. This was where he was going to get angry with her, and she knew she deserved his harsh words, but that didn't make receiving them any easier. But she would bear with it, and she would work up the strength to apologize properly.

"We'd better get going," Asch's voice broke the silence. Natalia's tensed muscles all relaxed. He wasn't... Natalia looked up, but he looked away the moment she did. He wouldn't even look her in the eye.

"I dodged a few people on my way up," he continued. "It won't be long before they realize I'm not down there anymore."

"I agree," Jade pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. "Seeing as we've found our prize, I suggest we depart. I'd like to leave Daath without running into the God-Generals."

"That would be a first," Anise rolled her eyes. "Those guys are always on our case, huh?"

"You should save it until we're out of Daath," Guy commented as they all backtracked through the maze of corridors.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," the Fon Master Guardian agreed. "But still, you gotta wonder how they find us all the time."

Asch said nothing.

Despite their irony invoking conversation about the God-Generals, everyone made it out of the Cathedral without running into any kind of trouble. The sudden mobilization of the Oracle Knights in Daath itself told them they had gotten out none too soon, but blending into the midday crowds was simple enough and they easily avoided detection. Before long the found themselves within sight of Daath's outskirts. They were almost there.

"Don't move." The sound of a gun loading confirmed the identity of the person behind them, if her voice hadn't already given her away.

"Come to finish the job you botched up last time?" Asch taunted.
"I'd watch your tongue," Legretta pressed a barrel to the back of Asch's skull. "You may be safe for now, but your time is swiftly running out."

"That's enough Legretta," the second voice called the God-General down and made everyone spin around.

"Well this is a rather less-than-pleasant surprise," Jade commented. "To what do we owe this honour?"

"I see you never change," Van replied. "As unsociable as ever."

"I try my hardest not to disappoint," the Colonel shrugged.

"What are you doing here?" Guy cut off any potential response from Van. Silence fell over everyone. Unfortunately, since they hadn't taken one of the main roads out of Daath, there wasn't anyone around to conveniently interrupt them.

"You've escaped," Van spoke directly to Asch, being the first to break the tense silence. A daring move, seeing as every member of the group before him was ready to jump him at the slightest upset, even with Legretta standing behind them. "Imagine my surprise when I come to see you and find one of our men in your cell instead. I guess I should expect no less from my student."

"Are these what you're after?" Asch dangled the keys to his cell around his finger.

"A door is simple enough to remove, what I'm after has a much greater value. The one I want is… irreplaceable. You know what I'm talking about, right? What I need is you, Asch."

"What do you want with Asch?" Tear demanded.

"Asch," Van directed his attention at the redhead, completely ignoring everyone else. They were a long way from posing any sort of threat to him. "I offered it to you once and I'll offer again, come join me and help me save this world."

"Not on your life," Asch answered, his glare nothing short of threatening.

"No? Surely by now you've had a chance to see the truth. The destruction that the Score demands be wrought on this world, the innocent blood that must be shed for an empty future."

"All I've seen is you and your attempts to drop the Outer Lands."

"Then what of Akzeriuth? And of more recent events? You know the lengths your so-called allies will go to see Yulia's prosperity."

"And what of it?" Tear intervened. "Maybe it is true that people have made some mistakes, but that doesn't mean they're worthless and should be eliminated. It doesn't mean you should give up on them and it doesn't validate replacing everything with replicas!"

"This isn't about replacing everyone with replicas, that is simply a means of accomplishing a greater goal," Van explained.

"And what kind of goal demands that you kill everyone in the world?" Guy asked, the look on his face as dangerous as Asch's.

"Such means wouldn't… no they shouldn't be necessary, but they are. People are fools, unable to breathe unless the Score tells them too. Yulia left us a poison, and it will claim everyone unless
something is done. I will see that the world lives on, even if that world is a replica. For that I need your help, Asch. I need you to give a dying world hope again."

"No."

"Fine, I see you still need more time to grasp the truth. But time is swiftly running thin, I need your cooperation."

"Why? You still haven't explained why you want Asch!" Tear protested. "Or why you tried to have Luke killed! Why do you need Asch and not Luke?"

"That thing?" Van spat, the silent Luke subconsciously cringed at the harsh words. "It's hardly capable of helping me build a new world. A worthless failure like that has no place in the future. It's only purpose was to die in Akzeriuth, and even that it couldn't accomplish."

"How could you- Stop calling Luke 'it'!" Tear could barely speak she was so taken aback and disgusted at the way her brother was treating Luke. It was as if Luke was nothing more than a piece of garbage to be discarded at leisure. How… How could he see people like that?

"Oh?" An evil gleam shone in Van's eye at that realization. A look that made every hair on the back of Luke's neck stand on edge... he wouldn't…

"I see," Van chuckled, a scarily evil edge to his voice. "So you haven't told them your precious little secret."

"Shut up!" Luke, who had been completely silent up to this point, exploded and in a split second was charging his former teacher.

It was so quick it was almost impossible to follow. Van drew his own blade and easily intercepted his student's attack, landed a blow to the young noble's stomach and before anyone knew it, sent Luke sprawling across the ground. The redhead coughed and choked in an attempt to regain the breath he'd lost.

"Well then, allow me," Van said as he re-sheathed his blade, his condescending gaze never leaving the redhead on the ground.

"Van!" Asch's emerald eyes burned with fury.

"Van stop it!" Guy's cry echoed Asch's but neither seemed to sway the Commandant.

"It is a perfectly valid term for a worthless replica such as that."

Everyone froze.

"Asch," Van continued, "the next time we meet, you won't have any more time to reconsider. Remember that." Without another word, Van brushed past the group and he, along with Legretta, disappeared into Daath.

Silence hung over everyone. Luke was still on the ground, his golden red hair falling in his face and hiding his eyes, but they didn't disguise the tear that leaked down his cheek.

"Luke…" Asch took a step towards his sibling but Luke scrambled to his feet and before anyone knew what had happened, he took off into the distance.

"Luke!" Tear took off after her companion.
"Lu-" The blonde was blocked by an extended arm. "Asch?"

"Don't." The redhead said quietly as Tear too disappeared from view.

"But-" Guy tried to protest.

"No. It's about time we stopped hiding the truth…" Asch replied quietly. He took a deep breath before continuing.

"It's time… for both of us."
Replica

The sun beat down on Tear as she quietly walked along. Song birds flitted from tree to tree serenading the young Oracle Knight, but she didn't notice their joyful songs. She had other things on her mind.

The melodist continued to search among the scattered trees that stood just beyond the outskirts of Daath. Luke had only escaped her view a few minutes ago; he couldn't have gotten too far. She certainly hoped he hadn't taken off into the forest that grew between here and the ocean. If that was the case, she'd never find him. Yulia knows Luke has no sense of direction, Tear really hoped the young noble hadn't gotten himself lost.

Her fears, however, were proven to be groundless only moments later when she spotted a familiar head of red hair sitting under a tree. Luke sat alone, his arms wrapped around the knees his chin rested on. The sunlight filtered gently through the leaves casting a soft glow on her companion. He may not have gotten far, but he looked so… lost, almost dazed as he stared aimlessly into the distance. Tear's tensed muscles relaxed, at least he was okay.

Tear carefully made her way towards the redhead, doing her utmost not to startle him. Noticing her approach, Luke buried his face in his arms.

"Luke…" Tear sat down next to him and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. He still didn't look up.

"You hate me, don't you?" Luke's voice was muffled but it didn't hide the fact that he was bordering on tears.

What the? Tear almost removed her hand in shock. She knew that Luke must be upset after the way her brother had insulted and humiliated him, but how in all of Auldrant did he get an idea like that?

"Luke, why would you even think something like that?"

"You said it yourself… nothing good can come out of fomicry."

Then it suddenly hit her. Not once during all of her brother's musings did she actually believe the things he had said were true. If anything it seemed like an all too convenient ploy to try and sow confusion among them. After all, something like that was impossible... wasn't it? There was no way Luke was a – a…

But he really was a replica, wasn't he? A person created from fomicry. Luke who was so full of smiles and who lit up her world every time he walked into it; Luke suddenly represented everything she had wanted to hate, and that turned her world upside down.

Do you love Luke?

Jade's question echoed in her mind, mocking her ignorance. But how? No! This wasn't how things were supposed to be. Why? Why hadn't Luke told her this sooner? Ever since she had known him, he'd been lying to her. Here she had opened up, told him things she had never told a soul before, and he had fed her nothing but deceit. He knew how she felt! How could he do something like that?! How could he betray her like this?

Tear opened her mouth, but before she could say a word against the replica sitting beside her, she
noticed the tears that leaked from his eyes, half buried in his arms. The melodist clamped her mouth shut as a haunting familiar image crept back into her mind.

This was exactly the same as Akzeriuth had been.

She had found out something about Luke, something that appalled her, hurt her, and made her want nothing more than to lash out at the source of all this pain. But back then, she hadn't seen the full picture, she had lashed out at someone who was innocent and had done nothing more than make Luke suffer. She had never regretted anything as much as she regretted her actions that day, and she swore to herself she would never repeat Akzeriuth again.

Judgement could –no- it would have to wait, wait until she understood things better. This time she would give Luke a chance to talk, she would listen to what he had to say. She didn't know what she could do about her feelings, but at the very least she had to try. Tear had told Luke she wanted to know him, to see the person that he really was. Here she had just caught her first real glimpse into his world, seen a part of that essence that made up such a treasured friend. It scared her, but there was no way she could run away now.

She had promised.

No one had moved from the seemingly deserted road that led to Daath's eastern district. Not that Jade really minded, a lot of information had come out in a short time; it was bound to take them all awhile to process it. Squabbles certainly had the most amazing ability to uncover important information. Not that this was much of a surprise to him, that minor detail had been confirmed quite awhile ago.

What remained to be seen was how the others would handle things. Judging from the reactions, Guy knew, as did the Princess, which came as no surprise. At the very least he might get the chance to ask about a few things that had been bothering him for awhile now. Jade noticed Asch staring in his direction, looking away when the Colonel noticed. He was a clever one, Asch knew the questions that were coming, and that there would be no escaping them this time.

"Wait a second…" Anise was the first person to speak up. Her eyes remained fixed on that small patch of horizon from which Luke and Tear had both vanished several moments earlier. "All that stuff the Commandant said… it wasn't true… was it?"

Guy sighed and looked at Asch who met his gaze. A silent agreement passed between the two of them and Guy turned towards the Fon Master Guardian.

"Maybe we should look for a place to sit down or something," the blond suggested. "It's kind of a long story."

"Well then where do you suggest?" Jade inquired, a taunting tone haunting his voice. "We could always go back and ask the God-Generals to let us borrow a room."

"It'll be fine," Asch dismissed the Colonel's concerns. "If Van was really intent on taking me against my will, he could have easily done it just now. He's waiting for me to come of my own volition first."

"And will you?" Ion asked. To that, Asch never replied.

"Well why don't we go sit down in that little café just beyond the entrance to the city?" Guy
suggested. "It's usually crowded enough that we won't stand out or be overheard, but close enough
to the edge of town that we can make an escape if we have too."

"You mean the one where you and your girlfriend were hanging out?" Anise teased.

"Yeah. I- I mean no! She's not my girlfriend! You know there's no way that could happen." Guy
shuddered at the thought. Any kind of relationship with a girl that went beyond friendship…that
involved t-touching and hugging…. Guy shuddered again. It just couldn't end well.

"Don't we all." Asch rolled his eyes, the faint traces of a mischievous grin visible as he turned
around to head back towards the city.

"Ugh," Anise groaned. "This means were heading back into Daath, doesn't it?"

"Well that is where Guy's romantic little café is located," Jade replied with a mischievous gleam in
his eye.

"Jade! Not you too!" Guy protested, all the while doing his utmost to avoid the many women
mixed in the crowds they'd just walked into.

"Sorry, I'm afraid I can't hear you over the noise. These old ears of mine, you know. You'll have to
bring it up later."

Anise snickered as Jade defeated the blond. Leave it to the Colonel to somehow time it so they
were in the middle of Daath's crowds before Guy could issue any further protests. It left her to
wonder if he didn't plan it all ahead of time. It would definitely make a whole lot more sense, but
then again, maybe he was just an expert at using his surroundings. Whatever the case, there was
one thing she knew for sure. To date, Jade stood undefeated. But that didn't mean she was going to
stop trying!

The evil gleam in Anise's eye was quickly replaced by a flutter of annoyance. The crowds hadn't
diminished at all in the time they spent on Daath's outskirts. It was a pain, but at the same time, the
numerous people made for a decent enough cover. For the most part everyone walked in silence,
well as much silence as there could be on a busy city street. Anise really didn't get it, why were
there always so many people in Daath?

Not that she really cared right now, what she really wanted to know about was what the
Commandant had said. Asch had mentioned something about telling the truth, but there was no
way Van was right, was there? Luke, a replica? No way! Sure he was stupid sometimes but he was
still Luke, and even though the two of them looked alike, he was way different from Asch. Most
days those two seemed like water and oil. Anise had no idea how they got along so well. Then
again they did have seventeen years of practice. Or did they? If Luke was a replica, didn't that
mean he'd have to be younger than Asch? Gyah! She didn't understand any of this replica stuff!
Hopefully Asch or Guy could shed a bit more light on all this. Otherwise it was going to drive her
nuts!

"What is it Jade?" Guy noticed the Colonel who had stopped behind them.

"What's up Colonel?" Anise piped up. "Do you hear something?"

"Hey look who it is!" Guy spotted a flailing hand in the distance.

"Guys!" The silver haired pilot waved to the group he had finally picked out of Daath's crowds. He
knew better than to call them by name, with everything they got themselves into there was never
any telling how safe that was.
It always seemed like there was someone or another after his newest group of friends, not surprising given everything that they were doing. It amazed Ginji just how much his newfound companions were willing to take on alone, even if it was to save the world. Ginji had a great deal of respect for them, just as he suspected everyone who really got the chance to know them did.

Thankfully someone in the group spotted him and they all stopped. Ginji hurried through the crowd, pushing people aside, stopping to catch his breath once he'd finally caught up to them.

"Asch! It's good to see you're alright!" The pilot finally managed between breaths. It had been awhile since he'd run that far.

"Ginji, are you alright?" Anise asked while Ginji took another minute to get his breathing under control. "What happened? Did you run all the way from the Albiore or what?"

"Sort of, except the Albiore isn't in the same place anymore. That's why I came to try and find you. A bunch of Oracle Knights were getting a bit too curious, so I moved her as soon as it was safe."

"Thanks Ginji," Asch answered.

"Of course," Ginji said with a grin. "But what about you? They didn't hurt you or anything, did they?"

"No I'm fine," Asch reassured the pilot. "Actually, why don't you come with us, it'll be easier to explain this all at once."

"Umm…sure," Ginji finally noticed the solemn air that hung over the group. "What's going on? What's the matter?"

"Don't worry, nothing's wrong," Guy provided. "Asch just has something really important he wants to explain to everyone."

"Okay," the pilot answered as he followed along behind everyone. He still couldn't shake the weird vibes he was getting from the group. What exactly was Asch about to explain? And where were Luke and Tear?

Van sat back in his chair, one of his hands absent-mindedly stroking his goatee. The small office that he had claimed as his own was musty, and a thin film of dust covered everything. It has been awhile since he'd made use of the place. The Commandant wearily eyed the stacks of paperwork that demanded his attention, but quickly decided against it. He didn't have the time or the patience for such a mundane waste of time.

His blue eyes remained fixed on the door as he allowed his mind to wander. Perhaps if it wandered far enough the throbbing it was causing would stop. He wasn't expecting anyone, though he vaguely hoped to see Asch, Mystearica or even Gailardia come through that door. He knew full well that was an empty hope. It was far too soon for either of them to have come to their senses. He didn't have the time or the patience for such a mundane waste of time.

The replica still lived. The thing was truly a nuisance, an unforeseen one at that. Even now, he regretted not ending its life right then and there, but that wouldn't have solved a thing. Having killed it there would have served only to anger those whom he hoped would join him, and he couldn't risk it at this point, especially given Asch's temperament. Van cursed the replica. If only things had gone properly in Akzeriuth.
There was still hope, however, for Mystearica perhaps more so than the others. But they too would come in time. Things would move faster now that the truth that the replica had tried so hard to hide was out. His younger sister's hatred of fomicry had not been part of his calculations, but it had turned out to be an unforeseen advantage. The chance to turn her against the wretched thing and have her see the truth had outweighed his desire to see it dead.

A soft knock on the door drew Van away from his thoughts. If it was someone with more of those Score be damned papers, they were going to get more than just an earful.

"What is it?"

"Just seeing if you wouldn't mind a visitor." A head of purple hair poked in the door with her usual wide grin.

"Aren't you supposed to be in bed, Cantabile?" Van arched an eyebrow disapprovingly as the God-General limped into his office.

"With you in here worrying like you do, not a chance. Besides, it's not as bad as it looks."

"How's your leg?"

"It's fine, the healers say it'll be as good as new in a couple weeks." Cantabile shrugged. "It makes taking the stairs to your office a pain though," she added with a mischievous wink.

"Didn't the healers give you crutches?" The Commandant asked sceptically.

"No way am I using those things. I'm not some cripple!" The young God-General protested. Van simply rolled his eyes.

"So who gave you those injuries, was it the Necromancer?"

"No, it was Asch that got my leg," Cantabile provided. "The Necromancer took advantage of that. I barely got away with just a messed up arm, he certainly plays for keeps."

"That's not like you," Van commented. "Asch shouldn't be anywhere near your level."

"Yeah I know, I just- I wasn't thinking straight."

"Gailardia?"

"Yeah, and other things."

"You can't let yourself get distracted so easily. If you don't stop getting so worked up you'll get yourself killed."

"Don't get worked up? Aren't we one to talk," Cantabile replied teasingly. "All you do is get yourself stressed into knots. Don't worry," the God-General took on a more serious tone. "I'm not going anywhere anytime soon, and neither are you. We both have work to do and a world to save."

"Yes," Van answered with a sigh before getting up out of his chair. "We have a great deal of work to do."

Asch stared into his drink, casually tossing the ice cubes around with his straw. The others were
unusually silent, probably because they didn't know how to start. That was fine by him; this wasn't exactly his choice of discussion, especially given everything that had just happened. But it was still necessary, and in all honesty, long overdue.

Poor Luke, Asch couldn't help but feel for his sibling. Of all the ways for his secret to come out, this had to be the hardest. Asch sincerely hoped he had been right in not letting anyone pursue his brother and the melodist. But it had been Luke's decision to hide the fact he was a replica, so Luke had to deal with the consequences on his own. Still, he worried.

"I think this has been put off long enough," Jade finally said with a sigh. "Why don't you start by telling us how everything transpired? I'm sure it wasn't something a family from the Kimlascan nobility did out of boredom."

Asch rolled his eyes but couldn't resist the grin that tugged at his lips. Leave it to the old man…

"Seventeen years ago," Asch began, "I was born into the Kimlascan nobility to Duke Fabre and Lady Suzanne. I was named Luke fon Fabre, and I was their only child."

"You're Luke?!" Anise interrupted. "Did you two switch again?" Asch solemnly shook his head.
"But then how…" the Fon Master Guardian continued, a confused look on her face. Then it hit her.
"Hold up! Back up a second, you're not implying what the Commandant said about Luke was actually true?! If it was, why didn't you ever say anything?"

"Anise…" Ion tried to intervene.

"No, it's alright," Asch shook his head and sent Ion a grateful smile. "That's right, what Van said is true. Luke is my replica. The old man over here figured it out." Asch turned his attention to the Colonel in question. "What I wanted to ask you was: what gave us away?"

"I had a sneaking suspicion from the moment we met in the Cheagle Woods," Jade admitted. "You look too alike for your own good."

"Choral Castle then?"

"So that huge machine in the basement was actually a fomicry machine?" Anise asked.

"That's right."

"Perhaps you could tell us the story from the beginning?" Ion suggested.

"I think that's a good idea," Guy agreed. Asch shot Guy a dirty look but the blonde shrugged it off. They were going to have to tell it one way or another, and they both knew it. Though Asch would have been much happier fielding questions than divulging unnecessary information, it was better to do it this way, and he couldn't deny that. The young noble sighed in defeat and continued his story.

"When I was 10 years old, I went missing from the manor. It was a big deal, and word of it even reached Malkuth. They were being blamed for having taken me and things got pretty tense for awhile. Almost a month later, a ten year old boy was found in the ruins of Choral Castle. He was the same height and had the same red hair as he wandered aimlessly with no memories of what had happened or who he was. In fact, he had no memories at all. He was rushed home to his family and happily continued on with his life. It was a month or so after that when I finally came home."
"Is that why you and Luke were forbidden from leaving Baticul?" Ion asked.

Asch nodded. "Since they could never pin down the culprit, there was no saying if they'd try again. Mother wanted us to remain in the manor, but she knew it wasn't possible given how often I had to go up to the castle. So as a compromise, we weren't allowed out of the city, and if we were in the city, we had to have an escort."

"I presume that it was Commandant Grants that actually kidnapped you?" Jade inquired.

"Yeah, it was Van," Asch confirmed. "For the longest time I never really understood what he had wanted out of the whole thing. But given everything that's happened recently, I think I do."

"He wanted you," Ion said softly. Asch nodded.

"I think it was his intention that Luke act as my substitute so he could use me in whatever twisted plans he has going."

"But wait," Anise cut in, "if you knew it was the Commandant all along, then why was he still your sword instructor?"

"Like I said," Asch repeated, "for a long time, I didn't know what Van wanted. I honestly believed that what he had done, he had done for my sake."

"It seems like a strange thing to do for your benefit," Ion pointed out.

"When I was really young, I always wanted a sibling, someone my own age I could play with. Natalia and I spent time together, but other then that I didn't really have anyone around. I let myself believe that Van had done it to grant that wish." Asch sighed. He knew that was a lie, the same way he knew that Jade didn't believe him for a second. He had believed that because he didn't want to consider the alternatives. He had never confessed that Van was at fault, because he didn't want to believe that the person he had always looked up to was really as twisted as his actions had suggested.

"So what happened after you came home?" Ion inquired gently.

"Well we realized what must have happened when we spotted Asch and-" Guy shrunk back when Asch shot him a dirty look. "Sorry, I guess this is your story," the blond said apologetically.

"Fomicry was a pretty controversial topic back then. It was still being perfected and all the world leaders and nobility had their eyes on it in case someone decided to try and use it to develop weapons. So given the fact that fomicry was such a hot political topic, it wasn't too hard to figure out what had happened. I guess you could say that was the day we became twins."

"You know... I'm really only seven years old." Luke said softly.

Tear watched the redhead in awe at everything he had been telling her. A story of the boy she knew as Asch and how he had been replicated… it just couldn't be real; this was all just bad dream. Luke was sitting there, his knees still in his arms and his chin resting gently on those knees as he stared off into the horizon, talking as if he was in some kind of trance. His voice was soft and had a sad edge to it, like this was the last conversation they would ever have. No... it couldn't be… this wasn't happening.
"How's that?" Tear tried to ask gently. Her voice came out with a cold edge and she berated herself for it. Now wasn't the time to be letting her bitterness over fomicry get in the way.

"Well no one really knows when my real birthday is," Luke answered. "All we know is it's sometime between when Asch disappeared and when I was found, so it's sometime towards the end of summer. At home we would celebrate it on the same day as Asch's because we're supposed to be twins and all."

Luke couldn't bring himself to look at Tear, he just couldn't. She must hate him, of course she did. He was a replica, a product of fomicry, and she had made her feelings on that subject clear as day plenty of times. He didn't even know why he was talking. Maybe it was because the longer he talked, the longer he put off the inevitable. He didn't want to lose Tear, but what could he do? Nothing could change the fact that he was a replica. So he just kept talking, clinging to this last moment they had. In their last moment, he couldn't even face her. He was pathetic until the very end.

Tear forced herself to swallow as the reality of the situation continued to make itself all the clearer. She wouldn't let herself get angry with Luke. He had lied to her all this time, but he was telling the truth now, and it couldn't be easy for him. She owed it to him to at least hear him out.

"I've always known that I was a replica," Luke said, continuing before Tear had a chance to intervene. "Ever since before I can remember, it's always been a fact of life. It's just what I am, and for awhile, it never really bothered me."

"Luke had a hard time in the first few years," Asch said sadly. "Despite our parents doing their best to stop it, a bunch of the servants still treated him badly. There wasn't much known about fomicry at the time. Most of them saw Luke as an object, and treated him accordingly."

"That's terrible," Ion commented.

"I think that's probably where some of his apprehension about being a replica came from," Asch provided.

"Part of it probably comes from the fact that it had to be kept a secret too," Guy pointed out.

"I'm sure that didn't help," Asch agreed. "Eventually we started keeping it a secret from the servants as well. There aren't very many of them that still work at the manor who know the truth."

"Can I ask something?" Ginji spoke up.

"Sure, what is it?"

"How did you guys keep something like this undercover? I mean, I've never heard anything even remotely close to this and let's face it, you're the heir to the throne. How is it there's suddenly two of you, and no one notices?"

A grin spread across Asch's face. "You should ask around Baticul sometime, you'll hear some interesting stories. Since an official reason was never given, quite a few different rumours went around; most people actually assumed it had to do with competition for the throne. I've heard a couple different ones myself. I think the explanation that people finally decided on was that I, the older son, was a sickly child. Since I was never expected to survive, I was kept a secret so there wouldn't be any controversy about giving the younger, healthy, son the throne. Then I miraculously
'recovered' and claimed my rightful position. Of course, it depends who you ask."

"That's a pretty crazy story," Anise commented.

"Yeah, but people liked it for that reason. It also explained why there was still only one of us around for awhile afterward. Regardless, it worked well enough to keep anyone from digging too deep. You'll still find the odd person telling a curious visitor."

"Not only that, but to have a 'miracle', fabricated as it may be, surrounding the future ruler would only solidify the people's faith in his strength and will," Jade pointed out. "I'm sure such a story was not discouraged."

"It was probably seeded by some of the servants," Guy said with a chuckle. "I remember them brainstorming stories for when they had to go out shopping, since they knew they'd be asked about it."

"What about people close to the family?" Ion inquired. "Surely there must have been some people that knew there was only one child."

"A good majority of the Kimlascan nobility are aware of Luke's unique circumstances, as is His Majesty. They approve or disapprove as they please, but it's not their decision to make so we really couldn't care less what they think. His Majesty was the one that ensured those who knew kept it a secret."

"Seeing as you have Spinoza involved in your care, I take there was research involved?" Jade asked.

"That's right," Asch confirmed. "Though there are very few people aware of that fact outside our family and His Majesty. That's something a bit too controversial to entrust as common knowledge among the nobility. But at the time there was almost no information on fomicry. Our family funded a good deal of fomicry research, with the stipulation that there be no living replicas created, of course. Still, we've accumulated quite the library."

"Anything that could be of use?"

"No, I've read through everything we have at one point or another. There's nothing there that could help us with our current predicament."

"Quite a devious plan on your family's part," Jade pointed out. "Involvement in fomicry is risky for someone of such a high status, but at the same time, by funding it, it is much easier to keep tabs on all the research being done." Jade pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose.

"That was probably part of the reason it was done," Asch admitted. "But really, most of it was for Luke's sake."

"So why was it you decided to change your name?" Ginji inquired curiously. "Wouldn't it have been easier to just give Luke a new name?"

"Maybe," Asch shrugged. "But I had my reasons… and after everything that had happened, I guess I just needed a fresh start."

"In the end, I was the one to keep the name Luke," the young replica explained. "But it wasn't like I
took on Asch's role or anything. He was still the one engaged to Natalia and in line to the throne. But that was fine, I'm not really cut out for that sort of thing, you know? Besides, it wasn't until I was three that I could pass for any other thirteen year old."

"Didn't anyone ever question everything?" Tear asked.

"I couldn't honestly tell you. I spent most of my time either in the manor or up at the castle. I never went out into Baticul when I was younger. Once I was old enough to pass for someone my age I was allowed to explore Baticul a bit if someone came with me. By then everything had been settled for a few years.

"That is understandable," Tear replied. "I don't imagine they'd want it floating around Baticul that someone of your status was a replica." The melodist cringed as the words left her mouth. Saying them gave it such certainty. But for the first time since they'd begun talking, she didn't find herself fighting against the urge to be upset with Luke. If she had learnt anything, it was that Luke was the last person to blame. He didn't have any choice in how he was born, and getting mad at him for such a thing would only make her look more the fool. But it still didn't change the fact that he was the product of everything she had come to hate.

"No, it's a secret we've kept for a very long time, and wish it would have stayed that way." Luke buried his head in his arms again. "Why did everyone have to find out like this?"

"Luke…" Tear comfortingly rubbed the redhead's back.

"I'm just so sick of it!" Luke looked up again, his green eyes shining and ready to overflow. "Why is it that every time people learn something about me, it's because someone else told them? I hate it!"

"That's what happens when you keep secrets," Tear replied softly, turning her own gaze towards the horizon. "Before you know it, everything's out of hand, and nothing works out how you want it to. But that's why we have to keep trying, no matter how difficult things become."

"But what point is there in trying when you aren't working towards anything?" Luke asked.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Everything… it all belongs to Asch. I'm just his replica, there isn't room for both of us. Asch has always shared his life with me, but he can't share his future. I don't… have anything to look forward to or to work towards and now… now I've lost…" Luke trailed off and left a helpless Tear to watch as the young boy before her sobbed.

For the first time since she'd met him, Tear could finally see Luke for what he was. A boy helplessly lost and trying to survive among adults, drowning in a world he shouldn't have to understand. She could see why Natalia had always wanted to leave him behind. Luke shouldn't have had to go through the things they had, seen the things they'd seen… he was still a child.

And yet, he'd kept up such an amazing act. Not once had she suspected a thing. Luke had never given off any kind of impression that he had lived anything but his supposed 17 years of life. Sure maybe he was hopelessly naïve, and a bit of an idiot, but only seven? How much of his own innocence had he sacrificed for their sake, the torment he'd accepted in silence… and Akzeriuth? Tear's head was spinning as it tried to take off in several different directions at once. Yet, amidst her confusion, she found herself gently stroking Luke's back. So much more about her treasured companion suddenly made sense, but even with her newfound revelation, she couldn't decipher how she was supposed to handle this situation. So she simply sat there and comforted him.
"I must say, that's quite the story," Jade commented.

"That's about all there is to it," Asch replied conclusively.

"So what does this mean?" Anise asked, her voice loud enough to silence the surrounding tables. The young Fon Master Guardian shrunk down as she turned a few shades of red. Once everyone around them had returned to their conversations, she continued a bit quieter. "What I meant was, what does this change regarding you and Luke?"

"Nothing." Asch's reply was simple and to the point. A soft smile graced his face. "Nothing at all is different. Luke is Luke. Being a replica or not doesn't matter in the least.

"But wasn't Luke the one who almost stole your life away?" Anise asked with several levels of scepticism in her voice. "No offence or anything, but I don't get why the two of you get along at all. Didn't it make you mad to have Luke steal your name and identity like that?"

"No," the eldest redhead said as he stood up. "Luke needed me; that was all that mattered.

"Where are you going?" Ion asked.

"I'm going to head back to the Albiore," Asch replied as he reached in his pocket and placed a handful of gald on the table to cover the cost of everyone's drinks. One last gift from the few unfortunate Oracle Knights he'd encountered on his journey out of the Cathedral.

"I'll come with you and show you where it is," Ginji offered.

"Thanks Ginji," Asch said with a smile. The pilot returned the smile before quickly explaining to Jade where he had moved the Albiore so that the rest of them could find it later.

"Before you leave," Jade spoke up. "A question, if I may?"

"What is it, old man?"

"When you were captured by the God-Generals, you were disguised as Luke. Seeing as you're still in Luke's attire, I believe we can take that for a fact." Asch looked down at Luke's jacket he was still wearing and chuckled, deciding he really didn't need to confirm that one. "However," the Colonel continued, "their orders were to kill Luke, but that you were not to be harmed. How did they know they had captured you and not Luke?"

Asch looked at Jade with an expression akin to curiosity for a moment before a mischievous grin took its place. "You mean, you don't know?"

"Wait, there's a way to tell the two of you apart?" Anise asked, nearly knocking her chair over as she stood up.

"Yes there is," Asch confirmed. "But far be it from me to ruin the fun. I'm heading off now; I'll see you guys later."

"Wait, I'm coming too!" Mieu jumped down off the table and scrambled up onto Asch's shoulder. "I don't understand all this stuff about Master, mieuuu."
"Don't worry," Asch replied with a chuckle. "It doesn't change anything, Luke is still your master, and he's the same as he always was. He might need you to cheer him up a bit though."

"Okay! I'll do my best!"

"That's an underhanded shot," Guy mumbled with a sceptical look in Asch's direction. They all knew full well how annoying the young cheagle could be when he was on a mission; forget a mission to cheer someone up. It could drive even someone with Ion's patience up the wall.

"Speaking of Luke, how's he going to find the Albiore if it's been moved?" Guy asked.

"He's with Tear, I'm sure they'll find it," Asch replied. It was easy enough for him to give Luke directions, but their connection wasn't a trump card he was planning to give up just yet.

"You said he went out the east entrance?" Ginji inquired.

"Yeah that's right," Guy provided.

"Well if he heads back towards where the Albiore used to be, he should pass pretty close to where we are. If we keep an eye out for him, we can catch him as he passes," Ginji offered which appeased the worried blond.

"Why turning in so soon?" Anise asked the young noble whose back was already turned. Asch simply stretched and walked off, followed by Ginji who hurried after his companion. "What's his problem?" She mumbled once they were out of an earshot.

"Come on now, if he wasn't like that, he wouldn't be Asch." Guy simply shrugged and Anise giggled. It was so true. You'd think it would kill him to give someone a straight answer every once in awhile. Then again, maybe he was just taking a page out of a certain Colonel's book.

"This isn't an easy topic for him," Guy spoke up once Anise's giggling died down. "He may seem to brush it off like it's nothing, but it's as hard for him as it is for Luke. They don't keep it secret for nothing. Neither like it, but the fact of the matter remains that Luke is Asch's replica."

"Can I ask you something?" Anise inquired.

"Sure what is it?"

"Back when we were in Choral Castle, you made a comment about Asch. You said that you were surprised Asch was so protective of Luke, but you wouldn't explain what you meant. How come you think that?"

"Wow… that's a pretty good memory you have," Guy laughed nervously. "You see, when we first found Luke wandering around Choral Castle, he had absolutely no memories at all."

"You mean like a newborn?" Anise asked.

"No," Jade interrupted. "Newborns have instincts, they cry when they're hungry or upset, they recognize their parents. When replicas are created, they're completely empty, a blank slate if you will. They learn solely through imitating others."

"Wow Jade," Ion spoke up. "You're quite knowledgeable on the subject."

"Not really." The Colonel adjusted his glasses. "This is merely speculation, Spinoza would likely know much more concerning the development and learning patterns of a replica since he's watched
Luke and Asch grow up. But enough of that, Guy, please continue."

"Well we had no reason to suspect anything strange; we just thought he had amnesia from the trauma of the kidnapping and that his memories would eventually come back. So we brought him home and took care of him. It wasn't until he got home that we realized the extent of his so-called 'amnesia'. He had all the doctors baffled."

"Well it's no wonder, he didn't have any memories to find. However, we didn't know that at the time," Natalia spoke up for the first time in several hours. The young princess had been unusually quiet, and hadn't met Asch's gaze once while he was at the table. Even now, her voice lacked the confidence it usually held. "But regardless, he was still our Luke, and we had faith his memories would return on their own, and in the meantime we instructed him as best we could."

"So how does Asch fit into all of this?" Ion asked gently.

"We lost track of Luke," Guy replied. "That's how it all started. When we found him across the yard, there were two of them. I don't know what went on between the two of them in that time, and I doubt we'll ever find out, but by the time we got there, Asch was already coming to Luke's defence. If you think about it, Asch was the reason Luke joined the family."

"Asch was?" Anise eyed the blond sceptically. "I get why you're confused."

"Well those two certainly don't seem to make sense," Natalia pointed out. "But they still function just fine, so I guess all we can do is follow along."

"They do have a tendency to take the longest, hardest, and loudest way of getting there, but they do usually work things out," Guy agreed. "There's not really much point in trying to understand them. All that's good for is a good headache." Ion laughed. Perhaps the young Fon Master had been doing a bit too much of that of late. Guy shot the green-haired boy a smile before continuing.

"After that, Luke had to be taught everything from the ground up. He learnt quickly, but it still took him awhile to recognize everyone. I mean, he 'recognized' us in the sense that we were familiar, but he never really recognized people as individuals. Asch was the first person he ever called by name, including both of their parents."

"Well, all things considered, it does make a great deal of sense," Natalia pointed out. "Asch was different from everyone else in the sense he looked exactly like Luke."

"I doubt that's the reason," Jade said, interrupting the Princess' train of thought.

"What do you mean by that?" Natalia inquired curiously. Jade simply shrugged.

"You mean Luke recognized Asch because Asch was his original?" Anise suggested.

"I guess you could say something like that."

"Regardless of the reason, to Asch, who was undoubtedly struggling with his own identity at the time, it made a world of difference." Guy placed his empty cup back down on the table.

"Someone who recognized him… for simply being himself…” Natalia mumbled.

"Natalia?" Ion tried to catch the Princess' gaze as she became focused on the table.

"I'm sorry," she shook her head. "I agree, I think it would have meant a great deal to him."
"Well," Jade said as he stood up from his chair. Behind him, the sun was beginning to set and around them, waitresses were cleaning the tables that were quickly being vacated. "It's starting to get late, shall we rejoin the others?"

"We should probably get going," Guy agreed.

"Oh man," Anise stretched. "I wonder how Luke and Tear are doing."

"I hope Tear's okay," Ion commented. "She was certainly very passionate regarding her feelings on the subject."

"Yeah, I hope she didn't give it to him too bad."

"I just hope this isn't going to put a huge wedge between the two of them," Guy added. He knew full well how his best friend felt about the melodist. Among all of Luke's new friends, she held a special place in his heart. He sincerely hoped, for Luke's sake, that she could understand.

"Have you listened to Tear talk about fomicry?" Anise cocked an eyebrow. "We'll be lucky if we get Luke back in one piece. Well I guess if worse comes to worse we can always have the Colonel reassemble him." Jade coughed indignantly.

"I'd watch what you say around Asch," Guy replied with a nervous chuckle. "Or Jade will be reassembling you."

"What?" Anise inquired, her tone of voice suggesting she was slightly offended that no one enjoyed her joke. "Luke's a replica right?"

"Like Asch said: Luke is Luke," Guy replied, his eyes fixed on the golden sky. "He's younger than he looks, and he wasn't born like other people were, but he's still just Luke."

"Nothing more, nothing less."

The golden sky had faded to orange with splashes of red as the sun crept down below the horizon. The birds were still chirping and flittering between the trees that masked the Albiore.

"Hey look!" Anise was the first to spot the couple. "There they are!"

"Well they're walking together, that's got to be a good sign," Guy said, more to himself than to anyone. Though the two walked in silence and neither seemed to be looking at the other, they were still side by side. There may be hope yet, as miniscule as it seemed.

Tear spotted the others heading in her direction and offered a weak wave. Spotting the same group, Luke diverged and went towards the Albiore where he was met by Asch and Ginji. Tear watched him go, his resemblance to Asch stood out painfully well now that she knew. She only wondered why she had never suspected anything before. And yet, as she watched Asch doing his utmost to comfort Luke, she realized that she had never had any reason to doubt they were anything but siblings. To them, such a petty technicality didn't even register. The fact that they weren't really brothers… did it even matter?

It was the strangest feeling, Tear felt so… detached. Though she still smiled weakly and dismissed everyone's concerns, assuring them she was fine, none of it felt real. The only thing that seemed real right now was the redheaded boy in the distance and his replica.
Fomicry was a bad thing... wasn't it? It had destroyed her family, killed her parents and even now, was set to claim her brother. Major Cantabile, Major Legretta... they were all consumed by it, willing to sacrifice the entire world for nothing but a bunch of replicas. It had put her against everyone she had ever respected her entire life! It was a horrible technology that shouldn't even exist! ...right?

But Tear knew one thing: Luke wasn't a bad person, not anything of the sort. Without fomicry, he never would have existed, never been a part of her life. All those months of travelling together, all those happy memories, all the friends she never thought she'd have, they all in some way came back to fomicry. If it wasn't for Luke, if fomicry never existed, none of it would have ever happened.

Everyone else had left, made their way back towards the Albiore, only Jade still stood next to her watching the two redheads against the golden horizon.

"I guess this is the part where you laugh at me," Tear broke the silence between her and the Malkuth Colonel.

"Not at all," Jade replied.

Tear looked up at her older companion, his attention was still focused on the two in the distance. It was so strange; she couldn't make out the look on his face. It was almost... fond, like a parent watching over their children. Tear shook her head; she must really need some rest. That was the last sort of feeling a soldier like Jade would be expressing. The young melodist turned to look as well. In the distance, Asch was talking to Luke, all the while wearing a gentle expression. Asch smiled mischievously, and coaxed a smile from his reflection.

Jade stepped up behind her and leaned in. "You asked me to show you one person fomicry had made happy," he whispered into her ear. Then with one last look in the direction of the redheads, Jade too, made his way back towards the Albiore.

Tear stood alone for a moment longer, unable to come up with any sort of response to Jade's statement. She had been defeated by the man, completely and utterly. In the distance, Asch had finally gotten Luke to laugh. But Jade was right, she couldn't imagine a world where they didn't have each other, or where she didn't have Luke in her life. Was that really all thanks to fomicry?

She couldn't stand on the fence; she couldn't toe the line anymore. Tear knew she had to make a choice. Either she had to let go of her hatred, forgive the atrocities done to her family, or she would lose Luke, her most cherished friend. She didn't have the luxury of ignorance anymore.

The sun finally set, claiming with it, the last of the day's light. The birds all vanished and even the sounds of the monsters that roamed these parts were gone. Tear was alone, alone with her dilemma. No one could help her with this; she had to figure out her feeling on her own. Now that they were out in the open, she couldn't bury them away like she was so used to doing. She had to choose.

And what she decided would either lead to more wonderful memories, or it would put an end to all the happiness she had come to know.
That Which Can't be Said

The moon stood out in the starlit sky, casting its light down over Daath. The softly lit streets showed not even a trace of the crowds that frequented them during the day. Windows were closed and locked, and the emptiness seemed to echo throughout the empty streets. The only life to be had were the night guards, dutifully standing in front of the cathedral, fighting off the proverbial sandman. There wasn't a sound, save for the crickets who sang well into the morning hours.

Not far from the slumbering city, the same moonlight streamed in the Albiore's small windows, landing on a table surrounded by four figures. On the table, a huge map of Auldrant was spread out, covered with numerous markings in various colours. Known enemy bases, passage rings, fallen lands, the colourful lines and circles gave off much information to the three people who were intently analysing it, and engrossed in conversation over which of those marks would become their next destination.

Ginji stifled a yawn as he struggled to pay attention to the group in front of him. Sleep beckoned the young pilot; he hadn't had any decent amount of it in almost three days. It had already called the girls, Luke and Ion into their respective cabins and he was just dying to crawl into his own makeshift bed. But at the very least he wanted to try and last the remainder of the meeting. They were trying to decide their next course of action, something he really should be there for. But seriously, it was really dragging on. Didn't they ever get tired?

"So I guess it boils down to two huge problems," Guy summed up. "The war that Mohs is pushing to keep the Score on track, and the lands falling, which… well we don't know why Van wants to do that, other than to make room for some huge replica."

"And get rid of the rest of the world while he's at it," Asch tossed it.

"Do you suppose he's trying to throw the Score off?" Ginji suggested, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

"Throw it off?" Guy inquired curiously.

"Well you guys keep talking about how Van and the God-Generals are always expressing their hatred of the Score. Could it be their goal to throw it off? I mean, I've never heard of anything as huge as the Outer Lands collapsing in the Score, and even if it was in the Closed Score, Ion should have heard of it, right?"

"Well I guess it's possible. One person trying to keep the Score on track, another trying to throw it off, and both are our enemies," Guy said. "Kinda makes you wonder where we stand, doesn't it?"

"We don't know if that's really what Van's after," Asch pointed out.

"Asch is right," Jade agreed. "Making assumptions at this point could prove to be quite dangerous."

"Besides, the Score is already off track," the redhead continued. "If that was all he was after, he could have stopped seven years ago."

"After making Luke," Guy agreed, seeing what Asch was getting at.

"That's a rather important little tidbit you've been keeping to yourselves," Jade stated disapprovingly.

"It's not like we could say anything until Luke was ready to admit he was a replica," Asch answered defensively. "Let's face it, if it had been up to him, no one would have ever found out."

"How is Luke doing?" Ginji stifled another yawn. He sincerely hoped his lack of sleep didn't come across as indifference, but Asch sent him a grateful smile.

"Luke will be fine," Asch said, still leaning over the map spread out in front of them. "How soon will depend a lot on how Tear takes things."

"Well seeing as there is little we can do on that front, shall we continue on this one so Ginji here doesn't fall asleep in his chair?" Jade suggested slyly. Ginji sat up straight with a start, doing his best not to look like he was nodding off, even though he obviously had been.

"Well, with the Rugnica Plains in the Qliphoth, the war's come to halt, though neither side has formally ceased hostilities," Guy surmised. "At least there's no fighting, but there's no saying how long that will last. On the other hand, we have the Sephiroth that have gone out of control. We don't know how long before they drop the Outer Lands either. If only we knew how much time we had to work with…"

"Seeing as whether we stopped the war or not won't matter much if the lands plummet, perhaps we'd best start there," Jade suggested.

"But what can we really do?" the blond asked. "I mean we can lower the land, but then everyone is slowly poisoned by the miasma. If that's the case, then letting the lands fall might be the less cruel of the two options."

"They won't worry about the miasma long," the Colonel replied. "Once the passage rings shatter the lands will all sink into the miasma, regardless of whether they were lowered or not."

"All the more reason for us to do something soon then," Guy said solemnly.

"Jade, could you take a look at this?" Asch pulled an old book out of his pack and set it down on the small table. "I think it might be able to give us some ideas."

"My, my, what's this?" Jade picked the book up and began to leaf through it.

"I found it in one of Daath's libraries. It looked like it could be useful, so I brought it along."

"Useful, indeed." Jade continued to flip the pages, slower as more information caught his eye.

"What is it?" Guy tried to catch a glance at what Jade was reading, but quickly retreated when Jade gave him a dangerous stare. Apparently the Colonel didn't appreciate people reading over his shoulder.

"It's a history of the Dawn Age," Jade explained after a moment. Guy looked at him dumbfounded, no way had he read it that quickly. "It's a forbidden text of the Order. Even just from what I've seen so far, it looks as if it could be very helpful in figuring out a solution to our problems with the Sephiroth. I'd like to take the time to read it properly if I may."

"Have at it," Asch simply shrugged. Jade grinned, the Colonel knew full well that had been Asch's intentions from the beginning.

"So where are we heading tomorrow?" Ginji asked before anyone could disperse.

"I would like to go to Belkend," Jade replied. "I'd like to have a word or two with Spinoza,
assuming this text doesn't go into any greater detail then I've seen from flipping through it. His original specialty was physics, and I've a few theories I'd like to pass by him."

Guy shook his head. *Theories?* He had *theories* already?! He hadn't looked at the book for more than ten minutes! "Well that's where we were heading before this fiasco anyway, so I'm sure no one will object," Guy shrugged, trying to downplay his show of surprise.

"Belkend it is," Ginji said with as much energy as he could muster.

"Don't even *think* of getting up early." Asch pinned their silver haired comrade under a threatening glare. "You need your sleep too.

"Don't worry," Ginji answered with a grin.

"Oh we won't."

"We won't," Jade's voice laced with his most dangerous tone. It was soft, misleadingly so. No one had the first clue how he made such an innocent tone so obviously threatening. "If we are in the air before breakfast, I'm sure Guy will be happy to take over, while we hang our pilot from one of the wings." Everyone stared at him in a dumbfounded silence. "Well, now that that's settled, I think it best we all got some rest."

"He-he wouldn't seriously do that…" Ginji whispered nervously to Asch as they made their way down towards the cabins. "Umm…would he?"

"With the old man, you never know." Asch shrugged. "I don't know about you, but I'm not going to be the first one to find out."

Ginji laughed nervously. "I'll keep that in mind."

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Natalia rolled over in her bed and stared aimlessly at the ceiling. In the bunk beneath her Tear slept soundly, her steady breathing entrancing the young princess and occupying her otherwise unpleasant thoughts. It amazed her that Tear slept so well, especially given how upset she'd been before. Then again, perhaps she was simply so exhausted, physically and emotionally, that she just didn't have it in her to be restless. Natalia wished she was the same way.

It had been two days now since they'd rescued Asch, and she'd yet to say a word to him. What could she say? Sorry didn't even begin to express how she felt, nor was it anywhere near enough given her recent actions. And if that wasn't bad enough, she didn't even know where to begin with Luke. He still refused to speak with her, and rightfully so. Her irrational actions had almost gotten him killed, and for what? Some petty jealous fit. It was a wonder they even tolerated her presence at all.

What would she have done had they abandoned her? Natalia curled up under her covers and clutched her pillow in a death grip. It wasn't like she could return home; she wasn't even the real princess. Perhaps it was true no one knew that secret of hers, but she did, and she couldn't return as if nothing had ever happened. She was a fake, a fraud. No different then Luke really; she was nothing but an imitation of a princess who had died years ago. What would her father think if he found out? About either her actions, or her lack of royal blood… She had delayed the truth by following along with Van's schemes, but that couldn't last forever. All she had done was hurt the people she loved and scored another point against herself for that fateful day when the world would see her for the impostor that she was. She was beginning to understand why Luke hated being a replica.
Natalia had never even given any thought to the outcomes of her scenario. Not once had she thought Luke could be hurt, that Asch would be angry, that she might be betraying her friends… none of it. She had only seen an end, a long desired dream, and had foolishly ignored the rest of the world around her, disregarded the people she had hurt in doing it. To protect her secret? No, that was just an excuse, a line her mind used when the guilt was more than she could bare. She had done it for no one but herself, she had been selfish and had gotten nothing more than she deserved.

But she couldn't hide forever; avoiding Asch would only last so long, after all. Natalia had to confront him. This was a fact, there would be no avoiding it and the sooner she did it, the better. But for all that she knew it had to happen, it did nothing to appease her fears. What would he say when he found out? After watching the normally quiet Tear, and how upset she'd been that Luke had lied to her all this time… Natalia couldn't even begin to fathom Asch's reaction. Would he leave her, abandon her, right then and there? If he did she couldn't deny she deserved it, but in her heart of hearts that was her greatest fear. Tears slowly leaked down the young girl's cheeks and drowned in her soft cotton pillowcase. What could she possibly say to show him how she felt, how sorry she truly was? She would do anything, if he would just understand.

She still loved him. And she would give up the world, if it meant he would stay at her side.

"You better not get us lost again!" Hands on her hips and with an eyebrow cocked, Anise stood between Asch and the entrance to Belkend's labs giving said young noble what everyone in the group had dubbed 'the look'. It was pretty funny actually, sort of reminiscent of a mother disapproving of her child's behaviour. But seeing as she was the shortest one among them (with the exception of Mieu) and had to look up to give them her 'look', it really lost a lot of its impact.

"I wasn't lost," Asch argued, crossing his arms and giving the Fon Master Guardian a look of his own. "It's not my fault you didn't know where I was going."

"You're just lucky we ran into Spinoza. You were totally walking in circles!"

"And since when are you such an expert on the layout of the Belkend laboratory?"

"Last time we were here, we wandered for a good hour," Guy whispered to Luke, who was doing his best to hide his laughter. He knew full well Asch had been hopelessly lost, but watching his brother prove otherwise was amusing to say the least.

"Yeah, cause the boy genius over here got us lost," Anise added after overhearing Guy's comment. "You're lucky you weren't here Luke, we walked around for hours!" The young Fon Master Guardian punctuated her point by sticking her tongue out at Asch. Luke simply smiled. Little did she know...

"Well then Anise," Natalia piped up. "If you're so certain, why don't you lead the way?"

Anise looked at everyone whose gazes were suddenly fixed on her. "Uh uh, no way! You're just looking for a reason to blame me if we get lost!"

"But if you're leading and we get lost, isn't it your fault?" Mieu inquired innocently.

"Hey! You're supposed to be on my side!" Anise protested. "Well fine then, no riding on Tokunaga for you!"

"Mieuuu," the young cheagle's ears sagged.
"Don't worry Mieu, you can ride on my shoulder," Tear offered.

"You guys do realize that Jade and Asch have both gone inside already, right?" Luke spoke up before things got too out of hand. The girls both spun around just in time to hear the big doors slam shut.

"Honestly," Natalia rolled her eyes. "Would it kill them to wait for the rest of us?"

"Well seeing as we're in one of Van' strongholds, it just might," Guy pointed out.

"I guess you're right," Natalia replied apologetically. "Shall we go after them before they get too far?"

"I think that's a good idea," Tear agreed, sharing a smile with Natalia before following the Princess, Anise and Ion into the laboratory.

Luke watched Tear disappear behind the big brown doors. She hadn't so much as glanced back at him. Luke swallowed the lump in his throat. This was to be expected, after all, she hated replicas and fomicry. Why did he expect that he'd be the exception? They hadn't said anything to each other beyond the usual formalities: good morning, hello or excuse me as they passed each other in the narrow halls of the Albiore, but that was it. Did everything they'd had, the friendship they'd shared… really amount to nothing in the end?

"Luke, are you coming?" Guy's voice brought the redhead back to reality. "You've been a space case for the past few days, are you sure you're alright?"

"Yeah, thanks Guy."

"Don't mention it, I'm your friend, it's my job to worry about you. Now let's get going, this isn't the place to get separated from the others."

His best friend answered with another transparent smile and Guy was reassured several more times that Luke was, in fact, fine. Guy shook his head; didn't Luke realize it was obvious he was bothered by something? Most likely a something that started with a 'T' and ended in 'ear'. Guy had noticed the indifference that the melodist had shown his best friend for the past couple days. Yulia only knows how Luke was interpreting this new development, but the blond was sure it wasn't good. For all that Luke put every drop of his faith in others; he really was a bit of a pessimist when it came to figuring them out.

Thankfully, as the two best friends entered the front doors, they found everyone waiting for them in the entryway, some more impatient than others, but everyone was there. They all shared the same mentality: this was the last place they wanted to get separated, unless you counted Daath.

Rather than listen to Anise's continuous complaining for hours on end, Asch finally broke down and asked one of the lab technicians for directions to Spinoza's lab. It was simple enough, and though it required some backtracking, the lab was easy enough to find and so embarrassingly well labelled that they could only wonder why they hadn't noticed it the first time through. And it hadn't even taken them fifteen minutes.

As impressive as Spinoza's lab was, it would have been much more so had they actually found the man in there. Unfortunately, the complex fon machines and a mess of disorganized papers were all there was in the overly crowded room.

"This place is a mess!" Anise exclaimed, nearly tripping over one of the many cords on the ground.
"Do you think if we wait long enough he'll come back?" Ion asked hopefully.

"I'm highly doubtful of that," Jade commented as he eyed the mess. "From the looks of things, he's been planning to leave for some time now."

"What makes you say that?" Luke walked over to the table where Jade was scanning the many sheets of papers scattered about.

"Many of the pages with key information are missing, and the others are systematically damaged. For whatever reason he left, he didn't want anyone using his research."

"Do you think he knew there was a chance we'd come looking for help?" Asch began to leaf through the papers on the floor. Jade was right. Most held useless or indecipherable information, while others were either covered in dark stains or too faded to make out. Definitely nothing of any use, and definitely at least somewhat planned.

"Well, whatever the case, it doesn't look like he's been gone long," Jade pointed out.

"Hey guys, there's a door over here," Luke called as he examined the small exit. It was much narrower than the other doors in the building and was camouflaged by a bookshelf and some machinery. After a moment of trial and error, Luke finally figured out how to open it. Not that the young noble minded, there was something satisfying about pushing all the different buttons.

The metal door glided open and Luke hurried through it with the entire group not far behind. "Dr. Spinoza! Wait!" A flash of gray and white just vanished behind the door on the other side of the room.

'You idiot, don't make him run!' Asch reprimanded his sibling.

'What are you talking about? He's not running from us.'

'How do you know he hasn't betrayed us?'

'How do you know he has?'

Asch was silent.

"Luke? Asch?" The opposite door opened a crack before sliding open all the way. Spinoza walked back into the small office and set a couple of books back down on his desk. Though the hidden office wasn't in as much disarray as his lab had been, it was still rather disorganized. Pens and other writing utensils were scattered haphazardly across the desk and surrounding floor. Crumpled pieces of paper were tossed into various corners, and several fomicry books were sitting open to pages on many different topics. But Spinoza didn't seem to be bothered by any of it, from the look on his face, he had much greater concerns. "Thank goodness it's only you." The scientist said with a relieved sigh. "I thought you were one of those cursed God-Generals. But what, may I ask, are you doing here?"

"Dr. Spinoza," Luke continued after shooting Asch a disproving look for having doubted the man. "We were wondering if you could help us with something."

"I'd love to help you Luke, but I'm afraid now isn't a very good time."

"You said you thought we were the God-Generals," Jade took over the conversation. "Why are you fleeing from them?"
"It's all because of Class I."

"Class I?" Luke looked puzzled. "Like Iemon and those guys from Sheridan?"

"Sort of," Guy explained. "It refers to two rival classes, one from Belkend, the other from Sheridan. In the world of Fon Machines, the two have always been competing. Iemon, Tamara and Aston, or Class M, have all the attention right now though because of the development of the Albiore."

"Yes, and Class I was getting desperate to regain that attention," Spinoza explained. "Van Grants has them working on something they're calling the 'Preservation Project'."

"But what does this have to do with you?" Asch asked suspiciously. Spinoza looked at Asch hesitantly. The redhead dropped his suspicious gaze and nodded with an exasperated sigh. "It's okay, they know."

"Well, I'm not sure if even you're aware of this Luke, but I was heavily involved with Van when he was doing fomicry experiments seven years ago."

"Really?" Luke was somewhat taken aback. Though it did make sense then why Spinoza of all people was chosen to help look out for them.

"Yes, and something I deeply regret. Not that I regret the chance to know the two of you," Spinoza quickly added defensively. "But it was something I never should have gotten involved in in the first place. But at the time fomicry fascinated me so, I just couldn't resist Van's offer."

"That still doesn't explain why the God-Generals would be after you," Anise pointed out. "Did you find out something that they want?"

"Not exactly, Van has been asking for my cooperation again. Class I seems to have hit a few road bumps, and they want me to join in on their project. So he made me an offer: either I agree to help them, or he'll have me killed."

"That's terrible," Ion said sympathetically. "So you're destroying any useful information they may get from your lab and hiding?"

"I will never co-operate with that man again, even if it means my life," Spinoza replied definitively. "But the God-Generals are due back to hear my answer sometime today, so I've been trying my hardest to remove anything they would find useful, and I plan to run. I'm so sorry I can't help you."

"Why don't you come with us?" Luke suggested.

"Hey, that's not a bad idea," Guy agreed. "Why not join class M in Sheridan? They don't have the lab facilities that Belkend does, but you could probably still get some work done. Besides, Van doesn't have as much presence there."

"But how will we get there? I'm certain the ferries are all being watched in case I try to run."

"We have ways around that," Guy answered with a mischievous smile. "In exchange, Jade has a few things he wants to discuss with you."

"You do?" Spinoza asked somewhat in awe. "Dr. Jade-" At that point Spinoza managed to interpret the dangerous look Jade was giving him and stopped in his tracks. "Jade Curtiss," the scientist tried again. "What could you possibly want to discuss with me?"
"I've have some theories about ways to isolate the miasma in the Qliphoth that I've developed based on some information we've gathered. I'd like you to look over them, I'm afraid my specialty isn't in physics."

"Ah, it's been many a year since I've done much work in that area. But in my day I was a master physicist! I'll do my best to help you in any way I can."

"Well then," Jade said conclusively. "If we're going to leave, we should go now. The God-Generals are likely on their way, and I'd like to avoid a confrontation with them at this point."

"Now," Asch said. "Let's hope that's more than wishful thinking."

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In the end, the journey to Sheridan went off without a hitch. Though it had taken some fancy footwork to avoid Sync on their way out of the labs, they managed to go undetected. Once again, their silver haired pilot had done a wonderful job of hiding the Albiore from enemy detection, a feat all in itself given how large the airship was. It was a skill Ginji was quickly mastering.

Spinoza's worries about his reception by Class M were somewhat appeased when Ginji seemed more than happy to see him. Despite the occasional joke about switching sides, the pilot had no bias against Spinoza because he was from the rival class.

The elderly researcher spent a great deal of the journey speaking with Jade, mostly concerning topics that were so completely beyond the rest of them, it made their heads spin just thinking about it. Luke sat and forced himself to listen. He really wanted to try and follow along, but this stuff was beyond just complicated. The two of them might as well be speaking some strange new language for all he understood.

When he wasn't scheming with Jade, which for all they knew could be some grand plot to bring misery down on everyone, Spinoza shared his experience with Van, as well as provided them with all the information he could about the so-called 'Preservation Project'. Most of it was things they had already surmised, but it was still good to have it confirmed from a second source.

Sheridan eventually proved to be as welcoming as Ginji had been. Though it had been a just slightly less than rocky start. The three seniors stubbornly refused to concede to the fact that Spinoza was not, in fact, a spy, and it took the combined efforts of Ginji, Noelle (who had accepted their story the first time they told it) and several retellings of the current circumstances to quiet them down.

Luke flopped down in one of the chairs in the small meeting hall; he was exhausted already and they hadn't even started yet. He had forgotten how much of a handful Iemon, Tamara and Aston could be. They sure had an awful lot of fight in them for a bunch of old people. But as stubborn as they were, they were equally completely cooperative once they were convinced, and all three of them were now excitedly discussing things with Jade and Spinoza at the head of the table.

"Not that I mind you guys making plans or anything," Guy finally spoke up after 20 minutes of complex discussions that no one else understood. "But do you plan on sharing with the rest of the class?"

Asch snickered as the four seniors and Jade, or rather, the five seniors all looked up at Guy. He was right though, it would be kind of nice if they'd acknowledge the existence of the other nine people at the table. If he had to endure another five minutes of Anise's impatient fidgeting he might
have to strangle the girl. At least then he wouldn't have to worry about whether she was a traitor or not. It would solve two problems in one.

The scientifically inclined group at the head of the table looked at the group with a look akin to curiosity, as if they didn't know what the problem was. Yeah maybe the rest of them weren't much help, but Asch for one wanted to know what the hell was going on. Did they have a plan or what?

"My apologies," Jade pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose.

"So what's the deal?" Anise asked in a rather harsh tone. "You guys have been talking forever! Do you have a plan or are we just sitting here for nothing?" Apparently Guy wasn't the only one annoyed at being ignored.

"We've been working on a plan to keep the Outer Lands from sinking into the miasma once the Sephiroth cease to function," Jade explained. "It turns out that the cause of the sea of miasma originates in the core."

"It stems from the Planet Storm," Spinoza picked up Jade's explanation. "As all those fonons move through the core they cause it to vibrate, and that's what liquefied the mantle."

"So it used to be solid land before Yulia created the Planet Storm," Asch surmised.

"That's right," Tamara answered. "So what we need to do is find a way to stop those vibrations, then the core should solidify and the lands won't be in danger of sinking, Sephiroth or not."

"Can we stop the Planet Storm?" Luke suggested.

"That would be impossible," Tear replied. "The Planet Storm is what supplies the world with fonons, without it, eventually those fonons would run out and many things would cease to function."

"So then what's your plan?" Asch asked.

"We need to create a vibration that will counter the vibration the Planet Storm causes," Aston provided. "As for how that will be accomplished, we're still working out the details, but it will entail first measuring the vibrations, then carefully calibrating a device that will need to be implanted into the core itself."

"Well that sounds easy," Anise rolled her eyes. "How on earth are you planning to get something into the core?"

"You'll be able to get in from where Akzeriuth collapsed," Iemon explained. "We'll build the device into the Tartarus. It survived the fall into the Qliphoth, so with some adjustments, it should be able to survive the core as well. We still have a great deal of obstacles to work out, but this should still be possible."

"Have you made any progress in regards to the miasma?" Ion inquired. "It won't do to lower the lands safely if everyone will die of the miasma."

"I'm working on that," Spinoza said. "I'll need more time to verify it, but I've a great deal of faith in Jade's theories."

"So now it's just a matter of waiting to see if this can all be done?" Natalia inquired.

"I'm afraid so," Spinoza confirmed. "However, there will be some things we'll require from you as
"You mean other than diving head first into the core?" Anise asked sarcastically.

"Yes, unfortunately so." Jade tucked the book Asch had given him back in his pack. "We'll need to go to one of the active Sephiroth and take measurements of the core's vibration so that the counter vibrations can be properly calibrated."

"And how exactly are we supposed to do that?" The Fon Master Guardian sounded as if she was at her wits end. Did she not get enough sleep or something?

"We'll build you a measuring device," Iemon provided.

"Are you guys going to be able to handle all of this?" Guy asked. "This is no small project, and when you've just recently finished the Albiores."

"Ha! Of course we can!" Aston declared. "We'll show those Class I whose better and claim our 100th victory! No 'Preservation Project' is going to beat us!"

"I may not have been involved with Class I for a great many years now, but I'll still do my utmost to help out as well," Spinoza offered. "After all Class I is better known for their finely tuned devices. The measurement device shouldn't be any kind of problem."

"Poppycock!" Tamara argued. "Just you watch, we'll do a better job than they ever could!"

"I'm going to stay and help out as well," the Malkuth Colonel added.

"Jade?"

"I'm going to help work out the theory regarding the calibration device and isolating the miasma."

"We'll be needing all the help we can get," Aston admitted. "We don't have many spare heads, especially none of his calibre."

"And what about the rest of us?" Asch asked with a bit of a pointed look at the old man. He may not be all that fond of the man's endless sense of morbid humour, but he didn't want to leave him behind either. Jade was useful, he'd give the old man that much.

"While we're working here, you should head to Baticul and see about putting an official stop to the war," Jade replied. "We won't be able to afford any interference later on, so while we have the opportunity, it would be best to act."

"But what of you?" Natalia spoke up. "You'll be rejoining us later, won't you?"

"Don't worry Princess, these old bones of mine still have a journey or two left in them." Jade shrugged.

"Old bones? Ha!" Aston laughed. "You don't know anything about old bones yet!"

"Yeah, don't talk to us about tired old bones!" Tamara added.

'Old bones will be broken pretty soon if they keep that up,' Asch commented, sending Luke into fits of stifled laughter at the thought of Jade taking on the senior trio.

"So that's it? We're done?" Anise was already up and out of her chair before the words had escaped her mouth.
"For now, I guess," Tear replied. "But I'm assuming we're headed for Baticul next?"

"Yeah," Asch confirmed. "Jade's right; we have the time, there's no reason we shouldn't try and put a stop to Mohs and his attempts to start a war. I hate to ask, but Ginji, would you be able to help us out again?"

"Of course I will!" Ginji stood up so fast he nearly knocked his chair over. "I told you, I'm with you until the end!"

"Thanks," Asch said with a smile.

"I'll need to give the Albiore a bit of maintenance before we leave, but it should take more than a few hours. We can be back in the air by sundown."

"Tomorrow morning is fine," the redhead replied. "There isn't a huge rush, seeing as it sounds like things here will take awhile anyways. Take your time."

"Tomorrow morning, huh?" Anise was now halfway to the door. "Sounds good. Hate to run, but I've a few personal things to take care of. I'll catch you guys at the inn tonight, okay?" Then before anyone could say a word of protest, she had slipped out the door and was gone.

"My, she was certainly in a hurry." Natalia stared at the door. "I wonder what that was all about, she's been anxious since we sat down."

"It does seem odd," Ion noted, "even for her. She must have something urgent to attend to."

'Asch… what's the matter?' Luke looked over at his sibling who had stood up from his chair. His face had become dark and donned a very dangerous expression. What was it? But Asch didn't answer Luke's inquiry. Instead, he walked straight for the door and followed Anise out. This couldn't be good. Asch knew something he wasn't sharing, and whatever it was, it involved the young Fon Master Guardian.

It couldn't be good at all.

Anise finished the seemingly innocent letter and carefully tucked it into its envelope. Man, that stupid meeting had lasted forever! If it wasn't one boring thing, it was another. How Ion had the patience to put up with this kind of stuff all the time, she'd never know. But she didn't really mind everyone, sure the Colonel was a pain and Asch was too full of himself half the time, but things were always lively when they were together. She had fun... didn't she? She laughed and made jokes with everyone, and spent time with Ion… none of that had been a lie, right? Those smiles, those tears, all of them had been real. That meant all her friends were real too, didn't it?

Stupid Mohs, Anise grumbled to herself as she searched through the post house for the bird that looked the fastest. He was going to have her head if she didn't send in a report. He'd already threatened her with her parent's safety if she didn't stop delaying them. Damn him! She hated the conniving little- she wished she could rip his stupid guts out. Why should she have to work a low-life like him?!

But Anise already knew the reason. He held her parents hostage in Daath, and really, she should be lucky he did. If they didn't have their so-called 'jobs' in the Cathedral, they wouldn't even have anywhere to go. Ever since her stupid, gullible father had been conned out of all their money, they've been wrapped around Mohs' little finger. But she would fix that! She'd marry some rich old
geezer, and then they'd never even have to even look at Daath ever again.

Her parents couldn't afford to leave Daath, and so Mohs could get her to do anything he wanted to. After all, to him, they were completely disposable. Damn it, she hated him! She didn't want to have to betray Ion like this, she didn't deserve it. He only ever trusted her, and she hated lying to him. But she didn't have a choice! She couldn't let her parents get hurt, no matter how much she hated the situation they'd gotten her into.

"There!" Anise said to herself. The young Fon Master Guardian finally spotted a midsized bird. It wasn't anything impressive, but it looked like it had plenty of energy. Maybe she should pick a slow one, but Mohs wouldn't buy that excuse. He was already angry with her, and she was going to be in real trouble if she wasn't careful.

"You sure left in a hurry."

"Asch!" Anise almost jumped as she spun around. It took a second for her heart to settle back into her chest. How long had he been in the room? Seriously, he was worse than the Colonel! "What are you doing here?"

"What do you have there?" Asch's expression remained serious as he approached the raven-haired girl.

"This?" Anise quickly hid the letter behind her back. "It's nothing! Just a letter to my parents."

"Then why were you in such a hurry?" Asch made a grab for the letter but Anise sidestepped at the last minute.

"Hey!" Anise took another few steps backwards. What was Asch's deal all of a sudden?

"Give me that letter," Asch demanded. His face becoming even darker than it had been before. What did he think he was her father or something? He could glare at her all he wanted, she didn't have to listen to him. She wasn't handing over this letter!

"No way!" Anise backed up again. Her back was up against the door now. She could bolt, but then Asch would just be even more suspicious of her. It wasn't like she could avoid him forever.

"My, what have we here?" Jade snatched the envelope from the young girl.

"Colonel! Give that back!" Anise spun around and stumbled backwards as everyone else streamed in the room behind him.

"What are the two of you up to?" Jade asked suspiciously, still dangling the envelope Anise was after.

"It's a letter to my parents! Give it back!" Anise jumped at the paper but Jade easily held her at bay.

"Pass it over here Jade," Asch held his hand out. The Colonel looked at him for a moment before handing the envelope over to the redhead.

"Hey!" Anise protested. She was panicked, this was terrible! If Asch read that letter, she was done for! And with Ion and the others here! She had to get it back! "There are personal things in that letter! Don't you dare read it!"

"What's going on here?" Ion demanded. "Asch, it's not your place to be reading Anise's personal affairs. Please return the letter to her."
"I'm sorry Fon Master, but this isn't a letter to her parents." Asch ripped the envelope open.

"What do you mean?" Ion asked.

"Asch, stop it!" Anise yelled at the top of her lungs. Tears were welled up in her eyes and her fists were clutched so tight the skin under her gloves must have been white as snow. Asch gave Anise a harsh look, pulled the paper from the envelope, and began to read.

"Currently in Sheridan… Escaped Belkend with one of the lab's researchers and are currently working on ways to neutralize the miasma… Heading towards Baticul tomorrow morning to meet with the King…" Asch read off some of the key lines out loud as he skimmed the letter's contents. "That's not all; you've detailed everything we've been doing! Down to the last name!"

Asch passed the letter to Ion, who looked it over. A solemn, almost sad look swept across his face. "Anise, who is this letter for?"

No way, Anise shook her head in denial. This wasn't happening! "I- I told you, it's for my parents!"

"You're a very naughty girl," Jade began tauntingly, but his voice became serious and dangerous very quickly. "But it's time for you to stop lying now."

"I'm not lying!"

"Anise…" Natalia almost sympathized with the poor girl. She knew this feeling, this complete and utter hopelessness. When you know you've lost, but you still can't come to accept it. But it was because she knew that feeling, that she also knew the look in Anise's eyes; and Anise was lying.

"Y- You believe me, right Ion? I would never send this to anyone I thought might tell the wrong people!"

"Anise…"

"I'll tell you who it's for," Asch finally spoke up.

'Asch, I think you've done enough, please stop,' Luke pleaded. He may not know what Asch knew or who that letter was really for, but this was just cruel. Anise didn't deserve this.

'No Luke, enough is enough! I've had it with not being able to trust the people around me.'

"You don't know who it's for!" Anise protested.

"Ah, then it isn't for your parents," Jade pointed out.

"Anise, please tell us the truth," Ion pleaded.

"It-it really is a letter to my family! Asch doesn't know my family, so how could he possibly know who it's for?! How could he know how I chose to write my letters?!

"It's for Mohs," Asch cut the young girl off. His line proved to be the decisive blow. Anise's eyes were wide open, as she stepped back in disbelief.

"N- No way! You're lying!"

"Drop the act!" Asch's voice rose and silenced the protesting Fon Master Guardian. "I had a rather interesting conversation with Arietta while I was in Daath. You see, she said that you were the one who ratted us out last time we were in Baticul. That you've been working for Mohs from the very
"Asch, one of the God-Generals is hardly a reliable source of information." Tear attempted to point out. "They might be trying to split us up."

Asch hesitated for a moment, and Luke debated trying to say something, but the feeling flowing openly over their connection gave Luke all the explanation he needed. Asch had believed that, had desperately **wanted** to believe that. But he couldn't ignore what was going on before him, especially when Anise had probably just laid out every bit of information Mohs needed to stop their peace efforts dead in their tracks.

"But you see," Asch continued. "As I was escaping I happened to overhear Mohs getting a report. It was from you. He was pretty upset that you hadn't gotten it in on time. Had you been faster he'd have been able to capture Ion and the rest of us; put a stop to us for good."

"Anise…" Ion's face lost any of the light it had been holding onto. "Is any of this true?"

"I-it's not… I- I didn't want to!"

Everyone's hearts sank. Not once would any of them suspected bright, chipper Anise of such an underhanded tactic as spying. And for Mohs of all people!

"Don't you all look at me like that!" Tears were streaming down Anise's face. "I didn't have a choice, I was forced to!"

"So you've been Mohs' spy from the beginning," Jade surmised. "It was no wonder he managed to keep such close tabs on our activities."

"Ion…" Anise took a small step towards the Fon Master. "I-I'm sorry, I just…"

"Anise, do you know what the penalty is for traitors?" Ion said, his normally warm green eyes were stone cold. No one had ever seen Ion angry, least of all the small fury he seemed to be showing right now. The letter Anise had written was still tightly clenched in his fists.

"Y-Yes," Anise answered meekly. "Traitors are killed."

"Do you have any idea how many people got hurt because of the things you did?" Anise hung her head at Ion's words. All those people that died in the war… it was all her fault. She knew it, she had always known it, but hearing it from Ion tore her apart.

"I do." Anise swallowed hard. This was her worst nightmare, of all the people she knew she was hurting, Ion was the last person she wanted to ever find out.

"Anise Tatlin, you are hereby relieved of your position as Fon Master Guardian."

"No! Ion, please don't-"

"Noelle?"

"What is it Fon Master?" The blonde pilot had been standing quietly at the back of the room. She and Ginji had followed their friends to see what the fuss was, this was far more than either of them had expected.

"Can I ask you to give me a ride to Daath? I have some disciplinary measures to attend to there as well."
"Sure, we can leave whenever you're ready."

In Daath? Anise's gaze darted up from the floor. No! "Ion, wait! Please don't! They don't have anywhere else to go! They'll die if you kick them out!"

"I'm sorry Anise, but you've left me with no choice. Measures must be taken in accordance with Order regulations. This is the end of the path that you chose to take; I suggest you choose your next path more wisely." Then, without saying another word, Ion turned around and left the room. After a moment of tense silence, everyone else silently followed.

Her friends were gone; her family was as good as dead. Why? Why would Ion do something like that? He knew! He knew that her parents didn't have any kind of money or way to survive outside of Daath! This was all so unfair! It should be her; she should be the one to suffer for her own treason, not her family. It was all so… so… Anise pounded the wooden floors with her fists. This was all her fault. She should be glad Ion spared her life, but with no one left, and the only person she ever cared about with his back turned to her, she would have rather died.

There was nothing, the only sound that was left was that of ruffling feathers, and of cold tears dropping against the wood.

The sky had turned a soft shade of gold when the young Fon Master, followed by his friends made it outside; their numbers now short a treasured friend. At least, to Ion she had been a treasured friend, all his travelling companions were. It was because she was such that he simply couldn't refuse to act on her treachery.

It was such a foreign emotion to him. Was this what it felt like to be betrayed? To feel a strange mix of sadness and anger, disbelief and resentment? Ion had always believed in his friends, that what they had done, they had done for their own reasons, that they never truly meant any harm in doing so. Perhaps the same also held true for Anise, but he still couldn't deny his feelings. Ion felt betrayed, and it was a feeling he much rather would have not experienced.

"Fon Master, are you certain about this?" Natalia asked. "Returning to Daath could be dangerous, especially with the God-Generals and Mohs about."

"Mohs isn't in Daath," Jade provided. "I spoke with the postmaster. Anise was sending the letter to Baticul. That must be where he is at the moment."


"Thank you very much for your concern," Ion replied. "But I'll only be there for a short time. I'll return here and wait with Jade once I'm done what I need to do."

"What if Van tries to capture you? You have no one way of defending yourself." Guy said. "Maybe one of us should go with you, just in case."

"No, you should stick together." Ion shook his head. "Really, I'll be fine."

"Let him go," Jade spoke up before anyone could protest any further. "With the Sephiroth in their current condition, whether Dorian General Grants opens any more passage rings or not is irrelevant. The lands will still fall. I doubt capturing Ion is high on his priority list at this point."

“Thank you Luke, I will.”

“So what should we do about our young friend?” Jade nodded back in the direction they’d just come from. "I don't imagine locking her in there is an option."

“Please, leave Anise to do as she sees fit. I believe she knows the severity of her actions and has been punished enough. I'll speak with the postmaster and make sure she doesn't send any messages from here. She should not be able to interfere with you otherwise. Is that satisfactory?”

“That's fine," Guy replied. "As long as she doesn't give Mohs any heads up, I'm game."

"Thank you."

"Well then Fon Master, shall we be off?" Noelle offered.

"Yes," Ion agreed, following the blonde pilot towards the hangar. "The sooner we can get this done and get back, the better."

"You think they'll be okay?" Tear asked once the two were out of an earshot.

"I hope so," Luke replied. Tear turned to look at the redhead, and their eyes met for the first time in days. Tear quickly looked away. Any attention focused on the melodist was short lived as Asch turned around and walked away, without even saying a word.

"I wonder what's eating him," Guy wondered aloud.

"It's probably this whole Anise thing," Tear answered, still watching Asch fade away in the distance. "I don't think any of us ever thought she would do such a thing."

"That's what makes it all that much harder to swallow," Guy agreed.

"But that's not all either," Luke quietly added. Though Asch had already vanished from their view, his sibling had a long ways to go for his feelings to escape Luke's notice. Asch was really hurt, not that he'd ever dare to show it, but Luke could tell. The one thing that spoke louder than any of Asch's harsh words did, was his silence. He'd known this for several days now, since they'd found him in Daath. It wasn't like Asch not to say anything about it right there and then. He'd wanted to believe in her, he'd given her the benefit of the doubt.

Asch had changed, though no one else seemed to see it. The brother that Luke left that day when he had been swept away to Tataroo Valley wouldn't have hesitated for a second. He'd have revealed Anise's allegiances at the first possible opening. Never would have taken the chance that Anise might have sent that letter to Mohs. But things were different now, Asch was slowly starting to open up, even if it was only a little.

Luke only wished it didn't explode in his face every time he did.

Asch wandered aimlessly around Sheridan until the sun began to set. His mind wandered to many different topics, but in spite of his efforts, it always seemed to come back to the same one: why did everyone around him seem to betray him? He just had to get away from the others, even Luke for a little while. If he stayed he knew it would only be a matter of time before he snapped, and that he couldn't afford to do. He still needed to stop Van, and things were way beyond the point where he could do them alone anymore.
Before he realized it, Asch found himself standing at the lookout gazing out over the ocean. The sound of the water as it crashed against the cliffs was soothing, and the repetitiveness occupied his mind. He'd forgotten how much he liked it here. Though the last time he'd been here he got into a fight with Natalia.

Natalia… There was another issue yet to be settled. Another person he thought he could trust. He had never doubted his fiancée, not once. Sure they had their ups and downs, but he still trusted her with his life. Why did it have to be her? Of all the people to turn on him, why was she the one? The solid pillar, that constant support in his endlessly changing world had come crashing down that day, and even he didn't know if he could recover.

Natalia hadn't even so much as looked him in the eye since then either, not to mention that she hadn't said a word. Is that how it was to be with them now? Everything they'd gained over the past years, reduced to nothing, thrown away for some reason Asch still couldn't fathom. Didn't he at least deserve an explanation? Or would she just leave? Perhaps that's all he was worthy of in the eyes of the others.

After all, he certainly wasn't worthy of their loyalty.

"Asch?" Natalia's quivering voice drew the young noble's attention. He turned around to see the blonde Princess standing alone in the middle of the lookout. Her eyes darted to the ground when Asch looked her way. No, she had to face him she couldn't back down now.

"What is it?" Asch returned to watching the water. If she wasn't even going to look him in the eye, it couldn't be that important. As cruel as it may be, he just wished she would go away. He just… wanted to be alone right now.

"Asch, there's something a really need to talk to you about."

Asch took a deep breath before he said something he'd regret, and took a second to calm his annoyance before turning around. "Then what is it?"

"About what happened, Asch, I'm so sorry!" Natalia said with a deep bow. "I didn't stop to think about the people that I was hurting, or the trust that I was betraying. You have to understand, I was doing it for us. I thought- I though I was protecting our future! That means more to me than anything! I would do anything to make sure nothing ever endangers it!"

"Even sacrifice Luke's future?" Asch's gaze made Natalia's insides twist into knots. As if the words hadn't been hard enough to get out already, this was unbearable. Just how deeply the wound she inflicted had gone, was only now starting to be evident.

"I didn't know they were planning to hurt him!" Natalia pleaded. "I never wanted to hurt Luke, or hurt you! I didn't even want to go through with it, I hesitated… but I- I-"

"You what?"

"Asch, there's something you need know," Natalia said quietly. Perhaps if she confessed quietly enough, he wouldn't hear her. But she knew that wouldn't do; of all people, he deserved to know. "I'm not… I'm not really the Princess. The real Princess died at birth...I'm just her replacement. The God-Generals… they were going to."

"Do you honestly think I care about any of that?" Asch asked, his head shaking in disbelief. "So what if you're not the Princess? I don't care whether you have royal blood in you or not."

"Asch… I never wanted to hurt you."
"But you did. You think I don't know how you were treating Luke behind my back? All those lectures, the times you yelled at him, cut him down for trying his hardest. All the times you got angry with me, the stares, the silence, did you think that didn't affect me? Then to-" Asch couldn't even bring himself to finish the sentence. Silence hung in the air and an invisible tentacle of guilt began working its way around Natalia's throat. She knew she had hurt both of them, but she didn't want to believe that it had been beyond repair. They could still recover from this… right?

"What happened to you?" Asch eyes started to glimmer in the setting sun. "What happened to the person I fell in love with? The girl who built the hospital and helped expand the orphanage? Who sheltered the homeless and helped out with the school… The Princess of Kimlasca isn't the blood daughter of the queen. She was a proud girl, respected by her people, and she loved nothing more than helping those in need. She treasured her friends and she always did her best to support them … you… you're not that girl."

"But Asch! I-"

"The person that you are now is not the one I fell in love with… I'm sorry," Asch looked Natalia straight in the eye. "I don't know you."

Natalia dropped to her knees, her entire world shutting down as Asch walked past her, leaving her alone on the lookout. Tears streamed down her cheeks falling onto her trembling hands. In all her nightmares, she had never once dreamed of this. She knew Asch was upset and feared he might be angry; now she wished for nothing more than that anger. Anger would mean that he cared, that he wanted to see her become a better person. It would show her how strong his feelings truly were, that they were still there. It couldn't be over…

But no matter how hard she tried to convince herself, that sinking feeling refused to go away. She couldn't shake off the finality in Asch's words, the end that had shone in his eyes. If it wasn't over, why did her heart feel like it was breaking? The sun began to set on the shell-shocked Princess, and for the first time in her life she felt truly alone. So she did all she could do.

She cried.

Sitting in the shadows of the nearby houses, Luke took one last look behind him, and without a word vanished down the road from which he'd come.
Duke Fabre took a swift glance in the mirror before he slipped out the door and made his way down the hall. He had no time to lose, that much was certain. Curse the snake-tongued man that called himself a Grand Maestro. The time of the audience had been changed at the last minute, no doubt in attempts to exclude the noble from those present… Duke Fabre should have expected as much. With no one else there willing to argue against him, Mohs must think he’d have an easy time getting His Majesty to conform to his twisted ideals. But if Mohs thought that Duke Fabre would just stand idly by, he was in for a rather rude awakening.

From Mohs, such dirty tricks were to be expected. The filthy man was nothing but trouble, and he for one wasn't going to buy it for a second. The man was not to be trusted. What baffled him was how readily Ingobert seemed to be going to war. Surely with half the world sitting in the Qliphoth there was reason enough to take a moment to sort things out. The majority of their forces had been caught in the collapse, and Score knows if they were safe or not. Further hostilities should hardly be a priority.

Unfortunately, that alone didn't seem to be enough to detour His Majesty, and if Mohs had his way, there would be more blood shed by nightfall. The Duke let out a frustrated sigh as he stepped out into the blinding sunshine. One thing was for certain, if Asch or Natalia were here, none of this would be happening. Another black mark against the holy man who held Ingobert's ear; Mohs was the one that chased his sons out of the city and dragged this nonsense out far beyond what it should have been.

His temples were throbbing and it wasn't even midday. A quick nod to the castle guard who opened the door for him and Duke Fabre hurried up the stairs to the throne room. Headache or not, Mohs or not, he wouldn't let this war happen. He'd already failed to stop it once, and look at the lives that were lost. There would be no such mistakes this time, and if he had to wring Mohs neck himself, he would do it. War wasn't an option; there would not be anymore pointless deaths, least of all for someone as conniving as the Grand Maestro.

This country was to be under Asch's protection someday, and until he returned, Asch had asked his father to take care of it. For his son who would one day claim the throne, the princess he was to marry, and even for his youngest child who still wished for a bright future; he wouldn't not fail again.

Not this time.

Natalia sat alone on the Albiore, the handkerchief in her hands wrung tight as she continued to fidget. Never once did she think she would find silence to be so bothersome, but it was grating on her nerves. As if returning to Baticul, being forced to face the man who believed he was her father and not having Asch by her side wasn't enough, the lack of the usual activity that came with travelling among her friends was just unbearable!

The Albiore seemed so empty. Anise was gone, Ion went to Daath and Jade remained in Sheridan; suddenly there seemed so few of them. With Asch and Tear in their respective cabins, and Guy up front with Ginji, only Luke was left seated across from her. Conversation with him was out of the question; even she had enough sense to know he wouldn't want to speak with her. So she sat there in silence, with nothing but her fears to haunt her, knowing that Baticul was a scant few hours away
and there was no avoiding it.

It was ironic, she had done so much out of spite because she had wanted to return to Baticul, and now that she was finally going, she'd give anything to be elsewhere. Perhaps she should have volunteered herself as the Fon Master's bodyguard in Daath. But that wouldn't do, she knew she had to be here. No amount of excuses or diversions could stall her return home forever. Even if Asch put a stop to things now, someday she would have to return to the castle she had called home, and she would have to look her fear straight in the eye.

"What has you so worked up?" Luke's voice nearly stopped Natalia's heart. She eyed her cousin as if she'd just woken from a strange dream. How did he know she was upset? Only then did she notice the wound handkerchief that she held tightly within her clasp. Goodness, if she twisted it any tighter, she'd probably rip it clean in two. No wonder he picked up on her jitters.

"N-Nothing, it's nothing," Natalia managed, her voice somewhat meek in front of the one she'd hurt.

"Are you sure? You don't seem very happy, isn't Baticul where you wanted to go all this time?"

"Well yes, it's just... well things are a great deal more complicated now." Natalia brushed her hand over the wrinkled handkerchief in her lap, the repetitive motion keeping her emotions at bay. Had it been just a few days ago, had she known that she had Asch's support, then she might have been able to do this. But now...there was no one, no one behind her to help her along when things grew difficult, and she just couldn't. Not all by herself.

"Things are always complicated," Luke shrugged. "It's not like you have a choice, you're the Princess. Everyone looks to you, so you have to be the one to set the example."

"They look to you as well; you have more respect than you give yourself credit for."

"Me? Not really," Luke said nonchalantly. "I wasn't the one who built the hospital, or undertook any of those other projects of yours; I just threw in my two cents worth when you forced me to. You're the one they really respect, because you did all those things. That's why you don't have a choice; you owe it to them because they respect you."

Whatever retort Natalia was formulating fell off her tongue at Luke's last statement and the Princess found herself without anything to say. He was absolutely right. Perhaps she wasn't the only one who could truly stop the war her father was waging. Even if Asch could do it alone, she had a responsibility to be there. It was her duty to her country and her people, to all the wives whose husbands would never return, and to the mothers who had lost their children in such a senseless battle.

That didn't make it any easier, but as Luke said, she didn't have a choice. It was her responsibility to her country, to her people and to all those who believed in her. Not just because she was their Princess, but because of all the experiences she'd shared with them over the years. Asch or not, Princess or not, she still had that duty to them, and she would have to face her fears. Natalia would face her father, not as a child of the Lanvaldear family, but as the 18 year old girl who grew up at the castle, and who loved Kimlasca with all her heart.

"Luke?"

"Hm? What is it?"

"Thank you."
"What for?"

Natalia smiled, tears welling in the corners of her eyes.

_For just being you._

"This war is nonsense!" Duke Fabre's commanding voice echoed in the vastness of the throne room. Across from him stood the Grand Maestro, still with a conniving, spiteful gleam in his eye. Around them several other court members stood silently and at their head, alone on the center throne, was King Ingobert. The months that had passed since Akzeriuth hung off him like years, as he sat slumped over. No manner of battle or debate before him could return the life that once shone in his eyes, and he looked ever weary. This was quickly taking its toll, but a decision had to be made, and there was no room for error. "Your Majesty, there is no justification for such hostilities."

"The Princess and the heir are dead! Is that not justification enough?" Mohs quickly slid into the conversation.

"They are not! We received word that they were fine shortly after Akzeriuth had fallen!"

"Lies!" Mohs cut off the Duke only adding fuel to his borderline fury. "A ploy by Malkuth to make Kimlasca lower their defences before an attack!"

"I saw them with my own eyes! Your Majesty would have as well had this man not attempted to arrest them and driven them from the city!"

"They were impostors! They brought with them a Malkuth spy. Tell me, Your Majesty," Mohs snake like voice slithered its way up to the throne. "Would your true daughter bring an enemy spy right into the castle?"

"Don't insult me!" Duke Fabre's booming voice overtook the Grand Maestro. If looks alone could kill, the man would have dropped where he stood. "You think I don't know my own son?!"

"It wouldn't be the first time, I hear."

"Don't you _dare_ think you can speak of that you sorry excuse of a con man! Speak of my son like that again and so help me Lorelei I'll-"

"Enough!" One of the court advisors put himself between the two men, giving a stern disapproving look to both of them. "His Majesty is exhausted, we will deal with your debate at a later time. There will be no more audiences until further notice." An evil grin curled up from the Grand Maestro's lips and Duke Fabre shot him a deadly look. Delaying the issue was the same as a victory for him. Planned on his part, no doubt; for as long as they delayed, the war would continue.

"Will His Majesty see one more guest?" A voice filled the now silent throne room and turned every head in the grand hall towards the door. It just couldn't be… Mohs cursed under his breath. Impossible! What did that Anise think she was doing?

"Is that…" Ingobert sat up in his chair, his face gaining a life it had been lacking for months now.

"Your Majesty," Asch gave a small bow, and was followed in by Natalia, Luke, Guy and Tear. "I apologize for the delay, but we've returned."
"Natalia!" Ingobert would have flown from his throne had he not still been in the middle of an official audience. "Is it really you? How are you doing?"

"I'm fine," Natalia replied, also with a small bow. "We have many urgent matters to discuss with you regarding world affairs." The young girl did her utmost not to look the man before them in the eye. The thought of shattering the hope their return had brought him alone made her want to run, but she wouldn't back down now.

"I imagine you do," the rejuvenated King answered. "Can it wait until we've had a chance to catch up a bit?"

"I'm sorry," Natalia bowed her head, "but it would be in the best interest of everyone if we tend to them now. Delaying hasn't gone well for us in the past."

"I understand, thank you for sharing your concern," Ingobert sat himself up properly, and with a nod all the advisors took their respectful places again. "Of what matters do you wish to discuss today?"

"We wish to discuss the war you have waged against Malkuth and it's emperor over our supposed deaths."

"Yes, that has arisen from an unfortunate misunderstanding," Ingobert agreed.

"There is no reason for such hostilities," Natalia continued. "If at all possible, I'd like to propose a peace treaty with the Malkuth Empire to prevent any such instances from ever occurring again. A great many lives were needlessly sacrificed and-

"Don't listen to her," Mohs cut the young Princess off. "Don't believe a thing this woman says! She's not even the real princess!"

"How dare you!" Guy spoke up in outrage. "You can't just go around saying that kind of stuff without any kind of proof!"

"Ah but I do have proof," Mohs said, an evil gleam in his eye. "Your Majesty, I've a wet nurse who will prove that my story is true. This woman is not your daughter, the real princess died at birth! This one is nothing but a fraud, a fake princess. Why if you'd like, I can have her show you the remains of your real-

"I've had just about enough of your babbling!" Ingobert cut the Grand Maestro off. "Get out of my court room, and don't you dare return!"

"But your Majesty-

"Do you honestly think I will sit idly by as you insinuate such lies about my daughter? Get out! If I ever see you in here again you will be spending a good deal of time in the dungeon!"

"You would take such bold action against Daath?" Mohs' sly grin returned. "You juggle with the fate of your country."

"Though I can't officially speak on his behalf," Asch spoke up. "I can assure you the Fon Master will have no problems with Your Majesty's actions."

"Why you insolent little-

"Do I have to have you removed or not?" Ingobert's booming voice made the Grand Maestro
shrink down like a disobedient child before their parents.

"No, but rest assured, you will regret your actions." Mohs replied before backing out of the throne room.

"Natalia? Natalia, child, are you all right?" Official audience or not, Ingobert wasn't going to sit there as his daughter cried. Getting up off the throne, he walked up to her and held her in his arms. "What's the matter?"

"It's… It's true," Natalia managed through her sobbing.

"What's true?" the king asked gently taking Natalia's hand.

"I- I'm not really your daughter," she answered, doing her utmost to maintain some form of composure. "I asked nanny, even she admitted it. I was taken to replace your daughter when she died at birth! I'm not really the princess."

Silence fell over the court room. Guy and Tear found themselves taken aback by Natalia's confession. Tear in particular was stunned, stunned… and somewhat upset. Why hadn't Natalia ever said anything about the matter? It was obviously something that bothered her, wasn't that what friends were for? Tear gently fingered her mother's pendant that sat around her neck. She supposed she couldn't really hold it against Natalia, she had a great deal of issues she hadn't shared either.

Luke watched Natalia, and couldn't help but feel a pang of pity for her. In spite of everything she'd done to him and Asch, she'd really had it come back at her in spades. Her entire life had been a lie, and she believed that she was alone. But whether she knew it or not, she still had Asch's support. No matter how much he tried to hide it behind indifference and malcontent, Luke could see the worry in Asch's eyes. He wasn't ready to forgive her, but it didn't mean he didn't give a damn. If worse came to worse, he'd defend her, even if he didn't realize that himself.

But something seemed odd. How did Natalia come by this particular piece of information? She couldn't have known before they left for Akzeriuth, her attitude alone told him that much. But she said she had asked her nanny about it, meaning she knew by the time they were last in Baticul. Where could she possibly have heard such a story during their travels? Especially when the king himself didn't know.

Did she meet one of her real parents? Asch's train of thought followed the same tracks his sibling's did. There wasn't any logical way for Natalia to have accidentally stumbled across that information but still…her birth parents? That just didn't work; they would have known if that were the case. According to Luke, all her mysterious absences had been accounted for when she met with Van. Wait… could Van have been the one to tell her? That seemed like something the bastard would do, and he wouldn't even put it past the man to have used it as leverage.

"I never wanted to hurt Luke, or hurt you! I didn't even want to go through with it, I hesitated… but I- I-"

But if that was the case, how did Van know? Perhaps he was the one that knew one of her birth parents. Something told him that a story like this was along the same lines as Luke being a replica: it was a preciously guarded secret. So the only person who would know outside the ring of secrecy would be her real parents. Who knew what the story behind that was. He didn't like the implications though, Natalia's birth family being tied to Van somehow? That wasn't going to make this any easier, for Natalia in particular. Unlike the rest of them, she didn't really have any reason to be part of the fight, especially if she didn't have a country to fight for.
"That's an unfortunate piece of information," Ingobert finally broke the silence. "To think that all these years such a secret was kept from even me."

"What will Your Majesty do about this situation?" Guy asked defensively.

The king looked at Guy with a gentle smile. "You needn't be so concerned. I don't see any reason to do anything about it."

"What?" Natalia looked up, her sobs stopping dead in their tracks.

"But Your Majesty-" One of the advisors stepped forward.

"Natalia," Ingobert looked her in the eye and cut off any protests. "Royal blood or not, you are this country's princess and you are still my daughter. Eighteen years of working to build this country does not mean nothing, eighteen years of memories are not lies; regardless of whether you are a 'real' princess or not. Right, Luke?"

Luke smiled, "That's right."

"Nor do I see any reason for this to impede peace efforts with Malkuth," the king continued, returning to his seat on the throne. "You were right in your statement before, such senseless bloodshed should be prevented in the future. Natalia, will you help bring this about, for the country and the people who will one day look to you?"

Tears streamed uncontrollably down Natalia's cheeks. "I will, Father."

"Then we shall end things here for today," Ingobert announced. "Asch, Luke, I'm sure Suzanne is eager to see you both, you should return home."

"If that's all you need us for Uncle, then we will," Luke answered.

"Thank you Luke, that is all. Everyone is dismissed for the day, my daughter and I have much to discuss. Will you be staying for awhile this time?"

"We have a few days, but we will have to be off relatively soon," Asch explained.

"That's fine, I'll be sure to have everything you need by that time."

"Thank you your Majesty," the eldest redhead said with a bow before making his way from the throne room.

"You should hurry home," Duke Fabre said in passing to Luke. "You know your mother; she's very concerned about you."

Luke nodded eagerly and followed him from the throne room, followed by the court's advisors.

"Well Tear, think you'll be okay staying at the manor?" Guy asked. "I'm sure Natalia and his Majesty can arrange a room at the castle if you'd prefer."

"No, I'll be fine. The two of them have enough to worry about," the melodist answered with a nod towards Natalia and her father. "I don't mind staying at the manor, if you'll have me."

"You've got to be kidding," Guy laughed. "Of course we'll have you, even with all the servants, it's not like they're short on rooms."

"No, I suppose not," Tear said weakly. She put on a smile to appease the blond and followed him
out of the castle. The truth of the matter was, she didn't know if she was alright with it or not …but she wanted to be. She wanted to be like King Ingobert, who so easily put aside such problems for the person he loved.

Tear's face flushed. But it wasn't the same situation; she didn't love Luke... at least not in a romantic kind of way... did she? No that was just ridiculous. He was a friend, a very treasured friend. But he was also a replica, a product of the very thing that had led her life astray. And yet, as she clutched her pendant, she just couldn't bring herself to hate it. Don't be mistaken, she still loathed what had been done to her family. Her stomach turned itself into knots at the thought of dealing with her brother for good, and she wasn't alright with that. But she wanted to be.

She would have to be.

The weather was lovely, spring was starting to show its head, and the air wasn't nearly as cool as during their previous visit. Leaves were blooming on the trees and the midday sun warmed the cobblestone beneath their feet. Servants hastened to and fro, using the courtyard as a short cut now that it wasn't so frigid, and they had reason to hasten, Lady Suzanne had them all busy.

Just as everyone had expected, the Lady of the Fabre house was overjoyed to see her sons, and even though she was still recovering from a week's worth of bed rest, she was easily the most energetic of the lot. So much so that she had the entire house aflutter. Tear couldn't help but smile at her antics. It must be nice to have such a loving, doting mother. A small pang of jealousy struck the melodist, but it was swept away as Suzanne happily embraced Tear, thanking her for keeping the boys safe.

Envy was quickly replaced by a warm and comforting feeling, and Tear returned the hug. It was brief, but it was as if she too was a part of the family. She wanted to be, more than anything she would have loved to believe it to be true. No parents murdered by fomicry, no brother trying to destroy the world... just one family, who loved her unconditionally, and that she could love in return.

Suzanne attempted to approach Guy as well before quickly realizing it wasn't a good idea. Admittedly the small show the blond servant put on when his retreat sent him crashing into one of the maids was entertaining to say the least. The shared mirth only added to the warmth and welcoming atmosphere and despite her previous reservations, Tear found she felt more at home here than she ever had in Yulia City.

A smile graced Tear's face and several layers of worry fell off Luke's shoulders. He was so scared that this would be awkward, but he should have known Tear would have more tact than that. She always did, ever since he'd known her. It was only recently that he began noticing how skilfully she hid her emotions. Looking at her, you'd never think anything was wrong, that anything was bothering her. How many years of practice had she gotten to be able to do it so well? Luke still remembered when they first met; he had thought her to be cold and uncaring, a typical soldier with no regard for life. He couldn't have been more wrong.

Under everything she was a kind person, warm and gentle, who cared for all her friends. It began to shine through the more they had gotten to know each other, and the more he saw of her, the more she became a treasured companion, the more he found he cared for her. Now all that was gone.

But what could he do? He couldn't make out what she was thinking, how she was feeling, nothing. Not that he was very good at those things to begin with, but the way she kept up her formal
politeness and avoided his presence left him with a sinking feeling. He wanted to apologize, but for what? He hadn't done anything, the problem was solely with who, or rather what, he was… and that wasn't something he could change.

The fact that she'd returned to being that cold shell she was in the beginning was only proof of how much he'd hurt her.

Luke sighed and looked around, desperate for something else to think about before Mother asked him what the matter was. As wonderful as their mother could be, if she got it in her head that something was bothering either of them, they'd never hear the end of it. Across from him, Ginji and Asch were engrossed in a conversation with Mother to which Tear was intently listening. Guy had gone off somewhere with their father, presumably to give a report, and Mieu was energetically hopping from Tear's lap to his mother's then back again.

"Um ma'am," one of the younger maids carefully approached the Lady of the house. "I hope I'm not interrupting." The conversation silenced, and the maid nervously fidgeted with her apron as she suddenly became the center of attention.

"What is it?" Suzanne asked with a gentle smile.

"I- I realize this may not be the best time, but p-perhaps you could get Master Asch to come assist us with…umm… that issue," the girl stuttered. "It's causing trouble for the stable boys again."

"What issue?" Asch inquired worriedly.

"Don't worry, its nothing serious, just a bit troublesome," their mother replied. "Perhaps it would be best to go see for ourselves. Where is it now?" Suzanne turned towards the maid.

"Umm well,"

"Would you like to lead us there?" Suzanne offered. The maid nodded, her cheeks still somewhat flushed.

The young maid continued to fidget with her apron as she led them around the house. She had never been allowed to tend to the Lady or the Lord directly before. And it wasn't just the Lady, but both the young Masters as well! She was still just learning, such an honour was normally reserved for the more skilled girls who had been there much longer. She just happened to be the one walking by when the stable master told her to fetch them. She couldn't say no... but how was one supposed to act in this situation? Especially when she was introducing more problems for them to deal with…

"Don't look so worried." A hand rested on the maid's shoulder, and a soft pair of green eyes met her own. "How bad could it be?"

"I- I- It's not that bad, s-sir!" The girl felt her cheeks flush and her ears turn as red as his hair. He certainly was handsome, it was no wonder everyone had such a high opinion of him. Oh what was she thinking? This wasn't the time for such daydreaming!

'Having fun charming the maids?' Asch commented slyly once his sibling had finished reassuring the girl, not that he'd saved her apron from needing a good ironing. 'You're as bad as Guy!'

'I am not!' Luke protested, his own cheeks flushing a little in embarrassment. 'I was just trying to stop her from fidgeting. Honestly, you're worse than Jade!'

Whatever reply Asch had been formulating was lost when they turned the corner into the yard. The
so-called 'issue' was backed up against the house, just below the window to Asch's bedroom. Surrounded by three of the stable boys and the stable master, a giant crimson bird was hissing at his captors. Its feathers were ruffled and on edge, making the monster out to be much larger than it really was, and scaring the youngest of the three boys trying to surround it. On its belly were large oozing burn marks and patches of skin where feathers had been either burned or ripped off. Cuts and scrapes drew lines all over the poor creature, and in spite of its attempts to appear fierce, it was slowly growing weary.

"Is that..." Luke began to mumble.

"It's that monster from Akzeriuth!" Everyone spun around.

"Natalia, what are you doing here?" Luke asked incredulously.

"Father and I came to visit," the Princess replied. "We were told you were in the yard, but we hardly expected to find this. Is it right? The bird Asch used to get to Yulia City?" But her questions went unacknowledged.

"The poor thing has been here for a day now," Suzanne explained. "I thought this might have been the same creature you told us about the last time you were here, so I didn't want anyone to hurt him. We've tried tending to his wounds but he won't allow anyone near him."

"Thank you mother," Asch said and calmly approached the hissing mass of red.

"Careful Asch, it might not be the same one!" Luke called after his sibling, but was rewarded only by an annoyed wave.

Asch walked right past the trembling stable boy who was tightly clutching a rope. "You can put that away," the redhead said with confidence. The boy wasted no time removing himself from the scene. The remaining audience could only watch in amazement as the young noble successfully calmed the beast before them, and before anyone knew it, Asch was gently stroking the bird's neck.

"How in Auldrant to you suppose it got here?" Natalia wondered aloud as everyone approached now that the creature was calm again. That was of course, except for Mieu. The little cheagle was more than happy to keep as much distance between the two of them as he could.

"I'm going to guess he flew," Luke answered earning him a pinned look from Natalia. That was not what she meant.

"But how did he know to come here?" The Princess continued.

"Many creatures are able to find their way home without any manner of direction," the stable master spoke up. "Even if it's a place they've never laid eyes on before." A smile crept onto Asch's face. He never would have thought an animal could remember anything so well, especially when he had done all that talking simply to appease his own nerves as he had hurried to Yulia City. But the proud creature seemed to remember it all, right down to the view from Asch's window.

"Perhaps," Natalia considered it. There were several creatures she'd read about in her studies that returned to the land of their birth to give birth themselves, even though they'd never known the place. "But still," she argued, "it's been months since we last saw it." The bird squawked in protest. "Sorry, since we saw him. Why would he suddenly show up now?"

"You got caught in the fire in Arietta's stables, didn't you?" Asch said softly as he kneeled down to get a better look at the creature's injuries. The crimson bird lowered his head alongside Asch. "I know you don't want to, but will you let these guys take care of you?" Everyone watching couldn't
help but chuckle as the previously fierce monster put on what they all could have sworn was a thoughtful look. Mieu, who was now under the protective cover of Tear's hair, emitted a bunch of squeaks. The bird looked towards Tear in confusion for a moment, but then let out a series of clicks and chirps.

"He says he'll let the strange men bandage him up if they don't try to tie him up again," Mieu translated.

"Then don't tie him up and be done with it," Duke Fabre's voice almost echoed across the yard. "Asch you have guests, and it is rude to keep them waiting, least of all your Uncle." Asch scowled but didn't protest.

"It's all right," Ingobert's voice came from behind them. "Court has already been dismissed for the day. I do have some business to discuss, but I mostly just came to visit. It's been far too long."

"It has," Suzanne agreed. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"I'd love one," Ingobert replied. "Perhaps we should all go, there are a few things I'd like to talk about, especially with you, Asch."

"That's fine," Asch said and began his way towards them when he nearly fell over backwards. He glanced behind him to find the end of his jacket firmly locked in the crimson bird's beak. Asch took a few steps back, detached his jacket, and fixed the couple stray feathers on its head. "I can't stay with you while they bandage you up," he explained. The bird cooed softly and nudged the young noble's shoulder. "Don't worry, I can't stay, but Luke will."

"Hey!" Luke protested, but was completely ignored.

"I think that's a splendid idea," Natalia agreed.

"Way to step up to the plate Luke," Guy pat his best friend on the shoulder.

"Come on Guy, not you too!"

"Hey, you know I'd stay with you, but I've got lots of work to do while I'm back," the blonde explained with a shrug. Everyone had already disappeared from the yard.

"Why is it I'm the one to get left out?" Luke whined. Guy chuckled; it had been awhile since Luke had slipped into one of his bouts of immaturity.

"Don't feel so bad, they're probably talking about all that dry political stuff you hate."

"Still…"

"Well I'd better get going," Guy said with one last comforting smile. "Don't worry; I'm sure you'll find a way to make the most of it."

"What does he know," Luke grumbled once the blonde was out of an ear shot. Well, there was no point in standing around like an idiot the whole time, that would just give Asch all the more reason to tease him after the fact, and he wasn't going to let that happen.

Luke cautiously approached his brother's pet. The crimson bird eyed him wearily. It certainly didn't have any problems with him last time, but last time he'd been in Asch's body, so needless to say he was a bit nervous about whether or not the creature was going to give him the same reception it had given Anise. The young noble held his hand out, motioning as if he was going to...
pet it, but stopped halfway and let the bird curiously examine his hand. He could sense the creature's gaze. Oh this was so stupid! It was just a bird, and yet, he knew he was being judged, carefully examined to determine whether or not he was worthy of its trust. No wonder Asch liked him so much. They were exactly alike.

After a moment of consideration, the rather majestic bird lifted his head to meet Luke's hand, and Luke carefully stroked its feathers. The crimson feathers were so soft and Luke found him stroking the bird's strong neck like he often saw Asch doing. The repetitive motion was soothing and put his worries to rest, he could see why Asch had done this so frequently on the trip back to the Outer Lands.

Luke sat up against the house, and his avian companion followed, laying its head in his lap while the stable master and stable boys continued to work on bandaging the burn and multitude of other injuries on its side.

"I don't know if you can understand me without Mieu translating or not," Luke began gently, still gently stroking the soft crimson feathers. "But you have very good timing. I mean, I know you're a bird, and time doesn't really mean anything to you," Luke continued to ramble, "but you really did pick a good time to show up." The bird cooed softly. The warm evening sun was so nice, and the air was so peaceful. All Luke's worries, burdens, they seemed so far away. In this time, in this place, they couldn't reach him and for just a small moment everything was alright with the world.

"Because right now…" Luke said with a saddened sigh, "Asch could really use a friend."

Clouds covered the silver moon, robbing the manor of the gentle light it would have otherwise received. Only the soft sound of a widow sliding open and feet softly grazing the grass below betrayed the existence of any life in the lightless night. Asch carefully closed his bedroom window, careful not to make a sound. It was times like this he was glad his room was on the bottom floor.

The young noble turned around, letting the cool breeze sweep his crimson hair out behind him. His gaze shifted towards the sky but was disappointed when he didn't find a single star, and just when he wanted to look at them the most. There was something comforting about watching the glitter in the heavens, and that kind of peace was the sort of thing he needed to get everything sorted out. Perhaps the city's lights hid most stars from view, but whether or not they were as spectacular as the nights out in the wilderness, they still put his heart at ease.

A soft nudge in the side, and then Asch found a head of crimson feathers under his arm. He couldn't help but smile, and stroked the creature's head affectionately. So much had happened in the past couple days he'd spent at home, and he was finding that despite his intentions, most of his time was spent up at the castle working out the particulars involving the peace treaty.

In spite of that, he and Natalia still weren't talking and Asch had no doubt that everyone in the castle was aware the two of them weren't getting along. Guy and Tear had both caught on already. He saw the looks they would give him and Natalia when they thought neither was looking, and he just wished they'd stop. Between them, the servants, and the fight itself, time spent at the castle seemed longer and more wearying than he remembered it being. Guilt was starting to set in, about the things he'd said to her, and the way he'd shot down her attempts to apologize. What did he want out of her? He knew full well she'd paid for what she'd done ten times over already, but a small twisted part of him still clung to that pain, that feeling of loss and betrayal and just wouldn't let go.

It was just like seven years ago. How long had it taken him before he could face her again and not
just see her putting those flowers on Luke's head? Now was no different. Every time he looked at her, every moment his gaze met hers… all he could see were her green eyes narrowed in fury and full of hate. The suffocation as she pressed the cloth over his mouth, the warmth that fled from his body as the drug took its toll… the warmth that fled from his heart as the reality of her hatred tore it asunder… that pain was still all too real, and he couldn't, he didn't know how to make it go away.

But setting aside his relationship with Natalia or lack thereof, a lot of progress had been made. His Majesty had drafted up a letter with an official proposal, laying out Kimlasca's terms, and other issues to be discussed, Van being one of them. All they needed now was to get the proposal to Peony, and while that should be far easier than the journey Peony's letter took, they would still need Jade's help. The war had not officially ceased and until it did, there was no way a Kimlascan noble was setting foot in that throne room without Jade there to vouch for them. Even then, things could still go awry. Mohs may not have Peony's ear anymore, but Asch would be willing to bet he had a few of the court members around his greasy little finger.

"I don't know what to do anymore," Asch said with a tired sigh. He slumped back against the wall, letting himself sink down until he could feel the cool grass beneath him, the beginnings of the morning dew soaking through his pants and numbing his legs. This was all wearing on him far more than he cared to admit. There were days he woke up and wished for nothing but to not have to care at all, days he had to remind himself of everything he was fighting for. But as all those things slowly and steadily kept stabbing him in the back, he didn't know where to find that purpose anymore.

The crimson bird cooed comfortingly from where its head rested in Asch's lap. Asch smiled gently and patted its neck. "What are you still doing around here?" The redhead examined the bandages carefully tied around his feathered companion. There were fewer of them every day and he certainly seemed more energetic. "I think it's almost time for you to head home."

"I'm sorry, you can't stay here," Asch explained.

"Why can't he?" A soft voice asked.

"Mother?" Asch asked incredulously, keeping his voice as hushed as possible.

"I don't see why he can't stay, he's settled in quite nicely with everyone, and I'm sure he won't mind earning his keep by helping out here and there," Suzanne said with a smile. "You can help deliver letters, can't you? It might be a bit of a misuse of your abilities, but at least we know they'll get there safely, what do you think?"

The bird chirped and clicked an affirmative, batting his wings in pleasure.

"What are you doing out here at this time?" Asch ignored his mother's small talk.

"I thought I heard something on my way back to bed so I thought I'd come see for myself what it was." Suzanne sat down next to her son.

"What if it was some kind of thief or assassin? You shouldn't be wandering around at night without one of the guards!"

"I had a feeling it might be you," she replied gently. "You have a lot on your mind don't you?"

"Yeah," Asch confessed. "Is it that obvious?"
"You might not remember, but you used to sneak out your window a lot when you first returned home after Luke arrived. I always worried that you were going to leave us again… but you never went anywhere but out to look at the stars."

"I wish they were out tonight," Asch said sadly, gazing up at the clouded heavens.

"Even if the sky is dark tonight, those stars are still there," Suzanne replied softly. "No matter how long it seems to take for those clouds to pass over, if you're willing to keep watching them, they'll wait for you."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because my stars have always returned to me," she said, pulling Asch closer. "I know yours will too. Just give them time."

"I don't know…" Asch finally managed. "It's not the same thing. Things... are different."

"That's something only you can decide." Silence fell over them both and they simply watched the heavens together, searching aimlessly for a break in the clouds. They never found one.

"Well," Suzanne broke the peace that had found its way between them. "I don't know about you, but I think it's time to get some sleep. The sun will be rising soon."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Good night Asch, and … my goodness, you need a name don't you?" Suzanne suddenly realized, her attention focused on the bird sitting happily next to her son.

"He does…" Asch pondered, the bird indulgently allowing Asch to stroke its wing.

Suzanne smiled, "Why don't you name him Fleric?"

Asch couldn't resist the smile that jumped to his lips as his mother vanished around the corner. Maybe she understood better than he thought.

After all, Fleric in Ancient Ispanian… meant 'loyal friend.'

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Time had passed so quickly. Suzanne sighed sadly as she adjusted the stray red hairs that hung in her face. Then again, it always did when her boys were at home. It was already time for them to be leaving, and she couldn't bear to see them go again. She had just gotten so accustomed to the chaos that accompanied a pair of teenage boys, that the house seemed so empty in their absence.

In all rights, she should be happy. Happy that her boys were so grown up, that they were doing something so important not only for their country but for all of Auldrant. She was so proud of what they'd done and of what they were trying to do; but she still wished it didn't steal them away from her side. They'd both grown up so much, and she had missed it. Still, she prayed to Yulia each and every day that she return her sons safely home once again, and perhaps for longer than a week next time?

A soft knock at the door drew the lady's attention.

"Come in." The door opened a crack, and paused for a moment. Then it opened a bit further and a head of long tan hair slid in.
"I'm sorry for disturbing you," Tear said with a small bow.

"Tear, what brings you here? Shouldn't you be preparing to leave with the others?"

"I was done early, and there was something I wanted to talk to you about…" the melodist trailed off.

"Of course, dear. Here, have a seat." Suzanne sat down, waving a hand to invite her guest into the chair across from her. "What has you so troubled?"

"Well, it's not trouble, exactly." Tear claimed the seat Luke's mother had offered her, nervously fidgeting with her pendant. What had she been thinking? Bothering the lady of the house with her trivial little problems like this… but at the same time, a part of her really needed to talk to someone, and something inside of her brought her to these chambers this morning. Lady Suzanne certainly seemed the type to understand the feelings of another and who wouldn't judge them.

Feelings were always something Tear had kept to herself. It wasn't proper for a soldier to show emotion on the battlefield. There it only led to death. But away from the battle, that kind of attitude only brought sadness. But opening up, when she had never done so before, wasn't easy, especially when she didn't know who to open up to. But could she really talk with Lady Suzanne? About… this?

"That's a lovely pendant," Suzanne commented. Tear smiled and thanked Yulia that she seemed to understand Tear's inexperience with these affairs.

"It belonged to my mother," Tear explained, glad to engage in some small talk. "She died when I was still a baby, so it's all I have to remember her with."

"Don't you have any other family?"

"Just my brother, and he…"

"I'm sorry," the Lady apologized. "I didn't mean to bring up such a painful topic."

"It's alright; I am going to have to come to terms with things eventually."

"Don't force yourself," Suzanne said sadly. "No one should ever be okay with confronting a family member that way."

"I'll try," Tear offered a weak smile.

"I remember you wearing it the last time you were here, but I didn't have the chance to offer my compliments," she said, referring once again to the pendant. "But I don't recall it from the first time you came to visit. Is it an inheritance you've recently come across?"

"No, I've had it since I was little. I had bartered it off when Luke and I needed passage on a coach. In the end, we didn't even get where we were going. But Luke was the one who got it back for me when we found it in Grand Chokmah."

"That sounds like Luke. He has such a good heart, even if his intentions don't always come across as they should."

Tear took a deep breath. It was now or never. "C-Can I ask you something? Something personal… about Luke?"
"What is it?" Suzanne smiled, a warm and inviting expression. Some of the butterflies in Tear's stomach settled, but the words were still stuck in her throat.

"What do you think... about Luke being a replica?"

"Well, in what regards?"

"Doesn't it ever bother you?"

"No," she answered simply. "He's my son; the manner of his birth makes no difference. Just because he didn't come from my womb, or doesn't share my blood, doesn't mean he isn't family."

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"Your Majesty?" Guy asked softly. Tear tried turn away as best she could, but the words still reached her ears. "Did you really mean the things you said in the throne room?" Tear could see the blonde nodding toward Natalia from the corner of her eye.

"Of course I did," the monarch replied. "Just because she isn't my daughter by blood, doesn't mean she isn't my daughter by love. Besides, if I were to turn her away for such a petty reason as that, I could never look Suzanne or Luke in the eye again."

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Tear was starting to understand. All of them... they all thought the same way. But still something bothered her.

"But, what about all the pain that Asch went through? The kidnapping, the experiments, then believing he had been abandoned... he never would have had to go through that if it weren't for fomicry. Doesn't that bother you at all?"

Suzanne leaned in and gently placed a hand on Tear's shoulder, looking the melodist square in the eyes. "Knowing what he went through, what he must have been feeling... still brings me a great deal of sorrow. No matter how many years go by, those feeling won't likely change at all. But why is Luke to blame for that? Would you blame Luke for Asch's pain? Blame the technology someone used to do it to him? Blaming someone or something for sorrow is pointless. It only leads to more pain and more sorrow. I understand that your family went through a great deal of pain because of fomicry, but will your hatred really bring you any more happiness? I think that your parents would have wanted you to be happy, not cling to a blind hatred of a technology someone misused."

"But how do you know that?" Tear asked.

"Perhaps your own happiness isn't the only one being sacrificed for that hatred of yours."

"But still... are we to just forget the victims? What about their feelings? Their pain and suffering? Are we just to ignore it?!"

Suzanne smiled gently. "Asch isn't bothered by it, so why should we be?"

Tear sat back, pondering what had just been said.

"Luke is a sweet boy, he may struggle and get lost sometimes, but he always tries his hardest, and he finds his own way. To me, that's the most important thing to know about him. Not that he's Asch's replica, or that he was born from fomicry, but that he's honest and loyal."
"Thank you," Tear finally managed. "Thank you for speaking with me."

"It was my pleasure," Suzanne smiled. "Now come along, let's go join the others, we don't want you to be late getting off." The lady offered the melodist a hand. Tear was shocked gladly accepted it and was surprised when she was pulled all the way into Suzanne's embrace. The woman's soft whisper drifted onto the melodist's ears.

*I know you'll find your way too.*

"There you are!" Guy said doing his utmost to hide the exasperation in his voice when Tear and Suzanne finally arrived in the entrance hall. "I thought you said you were ready to go earlier."

"I had some other matters to attend to," Tear answered. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting."

"It's alright," Asch answered. "We're not running late yet. Surprising since someone can't make up their mind about what snacks they want to bring."

"Hey!" Luke protested. "At least I didn't spend all morning deciding on a sword!"

"It's more important than your snack is," Asch shot back.

"Is not! You're going to be eating out of my bag the whole way there!"

Everyone in the room burst out laughing. Both boys looked away, an embarrassed red hue sweeping across their cheeks. Tear found herself laughing as well. It was so surprising. For all they seemed to get along quite well during most of their travels, they argued endlessly while at home. She was only now starting to realize the truth behind it. The two of them only teased each other when they were at home, because it was the only time they were relaxed enough. She didn't doubt that once they were back on the road, all of Asch's stressing would return, as would Luke's worries and fitful sleep. If only this could last forever…

"So Your Majesty, will Natalia be joining us again?" Guy asked. Silence fell over the group. It was something no one had really thought about until now. But Natalia really didn't have any reason to continue journeying with them. She wasn't tied to Van or his twisted goals in any way, and given she and Asch were on bad terms, spending some time apart might not be such a bad idea.

"Sorry I'm late!" Natalia burst in the door, nearly tripping over herself in the process. Her quiver was half dangling off her left shoulder, threatening to spill her arrows all over the floor. Her blonde hair that was always so tidily kept hung messily from a poorly tied ribbon and the top she wore had many wrinkles hidden under the pack she carried.

Ingobert chuckled, "I was beginning to wonder about that myself."

Natalia took a moment to catch her breath; she must have run all the way from her bedroom.

"Natalia leaving her room without her hair being straightened up? That has to be a first," Luke slyly commented. Natalia shot her cousin a dirty look before proceeding to fix her ribbon.

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"I think it's time we were off," Asch finally said, tossing the last couple things into his bag, including a couple snacks to spite his little brother.

"Wait sir, not yet," a guard at the door spoke up.
"What now?" Asch rolled his eyes.

"There's a girl here requesting an audience with you," the guard replied.

'Oh? Busy seducing the local girls are we?' Luke shot.

'Don't even try,' Asch stopped Luke dead in his tracks.

'And since when do you get to have all the fun?' Luke scowled and Asch mentally shooed him away.

"Let her in," Asch replied. "This had better be quick," the redhead mumbled under his breath, still trying to deduce who their mysterious visitor might be.

Perhaps it's unfair to say Asch couldn't think of who it was, after all, he'd only had a second and a half to think about it as the giant doors swung open. But the figure that stood in the doorway dwarfed by the guards on each of her sides hadn't even crossed Asch's mind.

"Anise? What the hell are you doing here?" Guy spouted in sheer surprise. And yet, the girl who stood before them was nothing like the girl they remembered. There was no pout, no puffed cheeks demanding to know what that was supposed to mean… nothing. She stood there meekly; her shoulders were sagged and her knees pointed slightly inwards as she stared at the ground. Even her normally flounced black curls seemed to sag, only adding to the hurt expression on her face.

"What has you in Baticul, much less here?" Asch asked, his stern voice seemed only to pound the broken girl further into the ground.

"I- I came to say I'm sorry."

"I doubt you came all the way here, just for that," the eldest redhead said sceptically. "Are you here reporting to Mohs?"

"Mohs? To Mohs?" Some of Anise's life seemed to come back as anger flushed her face. "Why would I still bother reporting to that good for nothing pig! Do you have any idea what I lost because of him?!" As quickly as it came, all the energy dissipated when she looked away to hide her tears.

"My daddy's a fool," she explained. "He got conned out of all our money, so we had to go work for the Order to be able to pay it all back. They've worked there for years and never earned a dime for themselves, and still they act all happy, saying stupid stuff like 'as long as we have the Score we'll be fine'."

"No wonder she's so interested in rich guys," Guy commented.

"When I became Ion's Fon Master Guardian, Mohs wanted a way to get inside information. He said if I didn't report to him, he'd kill my parents! Kill them! I couldn't let him do that. So I worked for him… I betrayed Ion. At first it was so easy, he's so naïve, he'd trust anyone. But the more he trusted me, the more I felt terrible for what I was doing. But I didn't have a choice; I couldn't let my parents die!"

"Forgive me if I'm wrong," Natalia interrupted. "But won't you continue to report to Mohs with the same intentions of protecting your family as before?"

"It doesn't matter anymore. Ion.. he…"
"You were declared a traitor, so they were removed from the Order and banished from Daath," Guy concluded.

"They don't have anywhere to go! We don't have any other family they could stay with or anything. The Order of Lorelei was their only home, their only source of food or work or anything! There's no way for them to survive on their own."

"But Ion wouldn't…" Luke began.

"Ion's hands are tied," Asch cut in. "Rules are rules, even for the Fon Master. He can't help them."

Tears streamed down Anise's face, she knew those rules better than anyone. "But you still haven't explained what you're doing here," he continued.

"Please let me come with you again. I really do want to stop the Commandant, and put that good for nothing Mohs in his place. I know you don't have any reason to trust me or anything, but I really can help. Please… I don't have anywhere else to go."

"I think we should let her come with us," Natalia said. "She seems sincere enough, and I'm certain she won't protest if we keep a close watch on her activities from now on."

"That still doesn't mean she won't try anything," Asch argued.

"Well if she does, then that will be the end of it," Natalia shot back. "It's no reason not to give her a second chance."

"I'm on Natalia's side," Guy said. "Just think Asch, right now Mohs doesn't know Anise isn't working for him anymore. She could help us trip him up a bit at the very least."

"Yeah," Anise's eyes lit up with a trace of the mischievous light that once shone in them. "I could give him false information so long as he still thinks I'm working for him."

"That's risky. What's to say she's not seeding him information?"

"You're just never happy, are you Asch?" Guy commented, earning himself a dangerous look.

Asch thought about it for a moment. Guy had a valid point about feeding Mohs false information. Anything that could turn his attention from Grand Chokmah for awhile could prove invaluable. At his request, Noir had investigated the Fon Master Guardian's past and so far everything Anise had said matched point for point with the information he had gotten.

"What about you, Luke?" Guy asked the other red head.

"Well I don't mind, I just don't know about Ion. He's the one she really betrayed, I think it should be up to him."

"Point taken," Guy agreed. "It's hard to picture Ion not comfortable around someone, but it could very well get awkward."

"How about you come with us to Sheridan to get Jade and Ion?" Luke suggested. "If it's okay with Ion then you can stay, but if it isn't…"

"I'll go," Anise agreed. "That's only fair. Thank you so much," she said with a deep bow.

"Are we all set to go then?" Ginji inquired. "I've got the Albiore all ready, she's just waiting for us."
"Yeah, let's go grab us an old man and head for Grand Chokmah," Asch agreed.

"Have a safe trip!" Suzanne called after them.

"We will Mother," Luke smiled and waved back to her. Then her youngest son, along with his brother and all his friends, disappeared behind the giant twin doors.

They were gone again and she could only pray that their paths would lead them home again.

Sheridan hadn't changed much in their week long absence. If anything they were glad to have spent the time in Baticul. A sweltering heat wave had encompassed the entire city and simply refused to let up. Many of the normally bustling streets were bare with a few daring merchants doing their utmost to keep themselves and their merchandise cool.

Heat, however, was an unworthy obstacle for the members of Class M and they were found hard at work in the Albiore's hangar doing adjustments to the Tartarus. The battered warship was looking quite impressive considering it had essentially been disassembled and put back together with spare parts.

Aston was the first one to spot them and come over. Either the other two hadn't noticed the newest visitors, or they were too busy to care. Asch suspected the latter.

"How are things coming along?" The redhead asked.

"Pretty good, I'm afraid we aren't near done yet though."

"That's okay, we're just here to pick up the old man, we have an errand to run in Grand Chokmah and we need his help."

"Well there are plenty of old men around here!" Aston laughed. "Don't know how many we have to spare though. Can't say I'd mind going there myself."

Asch eyed the man sceptically. "You know what I mean. We're looking for Jade."

"Uh.. yeah, about that..." Aston whispered into the redhead's ear.

"What?!" Asch exclaimed, sending Aston stumbling backwards a few steps.

"What do you mean Jade's gone?!"
"What do you mean Jade's gone?"

"Well, he isn't anywhere to be found," Aston explained. "When he didn't show up this morning we went to check on him and found all his belongings packed and gone. He had checked out of his room and everything. We've no idea where he went."

"Has Noelle returned with Ion yet?" Guy asked.

"No, that's the baffling part. We thought perhaps since he'd finished his project that he'd gone to meet up with the rest of you."

"Well without the Albiore he couldn't have gotten too far," Natalia pointed out. "Shall we go looking for him? There is a possibility he might be trying to meet us in Baticul. We did stay longer than we had intended."

"The Colonel's not that stupid," Anise said. "Just like we're not getting to Grand Chokmah without him, there's no way he could get into Baticul without us."

"You have a point," Natalia conceded. "But where else would he be trying to go?"

"You said he had finished his project," Tear spoke up. "May I ask what he'd been working on?"

"He had been working on a measuring device to measure the core's vibrations. The design was all his and I'd been the one building it," Aston answered. "I was having trouble figuring out some of his plans so he spent a great deal of time assisting me. We just finished it last night, and now he's taken it and run off!"

"You don't think he'd try and head to the Meggiora Highlands Sephiroth on his own, do you?" Luke asked in worry. Even if he was the renowned fighter he was rumoured to be, alone he was in very real trouble.

"No I don't think that's a concern," Spinoza spoke up, turning everyone's head as he walked in the room. "The vibrations can only be measured in a Sephiroth that hasn't been tampered with. We had come to the conclusion that the alterations you made to the Sephiroth's operating system might interfere with the data."

"But from the looks of things my brother's already altered almost all of the Sephiroth," Tear pointed out. "Which ones are left?"

"I don't have any idea," Anise said disappointedly. "That's not easy information to come by, even if you were in Daath. Ion might be able to help, but he isn't here either."

"That still leaves us with the question of where would Jade go without an Albiore?" Guy wondered. "Noelle hasn't returned from Daath yet either. Should we wait for Ion and then go looking for Jade? I'd hate to leave Ion on his own longer than we have to."

"That's not entirely accurate," Spinoza cut in. "Noelle and the Fon Master returned late last night."

"They did?" Aston cut in. "How come I didn't know of this? And where's the Albiore?"

"It was after everyone else had turned in for the night. Jade left with them almost immediately after
"They'd arrived," Spinoza explained. "I'm afraid he didn't say where he was going, but wherever it was, he was in a hurry."

"So Jade took off with the Fon Master and Noelle," Asch pondered.

"But where would he be going with Ion?" Luke asked.

"I don't know," the older sibling replied, "but if that's the case then there's one way to find out. Ginji, can you get on those transmitters and ask the old man what the hell he thinks he's doing?"

"Definitely," Ginji said with an enthusiastic nod.

"Good, cause then we're going after him and dragging him back here whether he wants to or not."

"I'd pay to see that," Anise commented under her breath.

"Let's just hope it'll be willingly," Guy muttered nervously.

"Thanks a bunch for all your hard work," Luke said to the researchers. "Sorry to leave so soon after arriving."

"It's no problem at all," Spinoza replied. "After all, this is our world too. We'll have lots to discuss with you when you return."

"Yeah, so don't keep us old folks waiting. Unlike you youngsters we don't have all the time in the world to wait!" Iemon shouted from the mechanical bay.

"Don't worry Uncle Iemon!" Ginji called back. "We'll be back before you remember we've left!" The silver haired pilot laughed followed by the two seniors standing with the group. His uncle had already delved back into his work and didn't even protest.

"How far are we?" Asch asked, taking a seat next to the silver haired pilot.

"Hard to say," Ginji replied with a mild shrug. "Not far though. An hour, maybe a bit more. Landing might be difficult though so that could delay things a bit."

"I'm pretty sure there's a port on one of the coastlines. If it's easier you could land in the water and pull in that way," Asch suggested.

"That should work fine so long as you don't mind the walk, it won't be an easy one. Are you sure this is the right place?"

"Play that recording again, please."

Ginji reached over on the dash and pushed a series of buttons. The small transmitter turned on, playing nothing but static at first, but then there was a discernable sound, and the voices in the small machine relived the transmission that had taken place just a few days earlier.

"Noelle? This is Ginji, can you hear me?"

"Hi Ginji, you're coming through clearly on this end."
"Do you have the Fon Master and Jade on board by any chance?"

"Yeah, Jade had asked for a ride so I agreed. It's been awhile since I was out flying so I don't mind. Why, is something wrong?"

"No… Where are you headed?"

"Well we're just north of Grand Chokmah right now, we're heading north for-"

"Noelle, shut that transmitter off."

"Jade, that hardly seems-"

--

The transmission cut out and static once again took over the speaker until Ginji shut it off. Damn that old man, just what the hell was he doing at a time like this? It was clearly Jade's voice in the background. Asch felt so stupid! Wasn't it Jade who had convinced them to let Ion go to Daath alone in the first place? But Noelle didn't seem uncomfortable or being forced to do something against her will. Ion's final protest at the very end proved he was safe, and also not in any form of distress. Nothing indicated it was any kind of trap but… It looked like tracking the old man down was the only way they were getting answers.

"Yeah, I'm sure it has to be Keterburg," Asch finally concluded. "The only other place north of Grand Chokmah is the Absorption Gate, and the old man wouldn't go there on his own, forget with the Fon Master that he'd have to protect."

"Ugh, why does it have to be Keterburg?" Anise's protest came from behind the cockpit. "I mean, I'm not against finding the Colonel or Ion or anything, but seriously, the ice capital of the world? We're going to freeze!"

"I heard there are some rather nice spas in Keterburg," Natalia commented.

"Yeah, there's quite a few attractions there including a casino," Guy replied. "It's a bit of a retreat for nobility and other rich folk, so a lot of things cater to their needs. Though from what I hear, Emperor Peony forbade any further development."

"Wow! A spa full of rich people? A Casino? I can't wait! How soon are we gonna get there?" Anise exclaimed in excitement, sending a wave of chuckles through the group.

"Why would the Emperor forbid the development of Keterburg?" Tear asked once everyone's amusement died down.

"Well rumour has it he spent the majority of his childhood there," Guy explained.

"Perhaps he just wants to protect the town he remembers and not have it overrun by the nobility," Natalia suggested.

"That's very possible," the blonde agreed. "But given how remote the place is, tourism is really its only source of income. So he couldn't cut them off completely."

"Where do you hear all this stuff?" Luke asked incredulously.

"Guy used to be a Malkuth noble, it's not surprising he's kept up with such matters," Tear replied.

"Yeah but…"
"Oh that's right," the melodist realized, "you're a member of nobility as well."

'You fail,' Asch taunted.

'Shit up,' Luke shot back.

"We're almost there," Ginji called back. "The port's in view now, I'm going to land in the water and pull up to the docks. You should probably start getting ready."

"Look, there's the Albiore II," Luke pointed out. Sure enough, Noelle's machine was silently sleeping in port.

"Well at least we know we've come to the right place," Natalia commented.

"But will we really be able to find Ion and the Colonel?" Tear asked.

"No idea," Asch replied honestly as he hopped out of the front seat. "But you'd best bundle up. It's going to be a long and cold walk."

Snowflakes gently drifted down from the sky laying themselves down upon fields of untouched white carpet. The forests of evergreens bore the load on their branches, making them droop down but giving them a magical look all the same. Luke's eyes lit up and the seven year old couldn't help but laugh as he ran down the road leading out of the Keterburg port. His arms spread out, and his cloak flying out behind him, the young noble ran in a circle before collapsing backwards into a nearby snow bank.

Natalia and Asch simultaneously rolled their eyes while Guy couldn't help but chuckle at his best friend's antics. Snow had always fascinated Luke ever since he was little, so was it really any surprise he was so excited? Especially considering Baticul never had much snow, and it never lasted more than a month before melting away. Guy had half a mind to scold him for diving into the snow like that, especially when they were going to have to listen to Luke's whining later when he was cold and wet... but how could he get mad at Luke for loving the world around him?

"Okay enough is enough," Asch said once everyone had caught up to the younger redhead who was still lying in the snow, his emerald eyes fixed on the falling flakes. The eldest sibling offered his hand. "You're going to get soaked and freeze before we get to Keterburg, and I am not listening to you complain the whole way."

Luke took Asch's hand despite the disgruntled look on his face. "Fine then, Mother."

Asch let go of his little brother's hand at the snide remark and sent Luke crashing back into the pile of snow.

"Hey!" Luke protested. But rather than an outraged look, a mischievous gleam shone in Luke's eye and a wide grin spread across his face. That grin was mirrored by his original and both of them took off down the road, Asch managing to stay just ahead of his brother's grasp.

"Those two," Guy sighed, laughing a bit when he saw Luke shove Asch into the snow up ahead.

"They're both going to catch a cold at this rate, honestly." Natalia crossed her arms, though whether her displeasure came from the complaints she knew would exist in the future or the fact that she wasn't in on the fun had yet to be determined.
"I don't think you can catch a cold from playing in the snow," Tear pointed out.

"That's beside the point," Natalia protested. Everyone shook their head in mild amusement at Natalia's displeasure. That wasn't what she had said. "Asch is a representative of Kimlasca, at the very least he should be acting his age. Luke may be seven but Asch is not."

"Come on Natalia." Guy did his best to try and calm the irritated princess. "Let them have some fun. It's been awhile since Asch was relaxed enough to mess around anyways. Things are only going to get worse from here on out... so let him enjoy it while he can."

Natalia watched the two up ahead, still attempting to push each other into the deep banks. They had since drawn their swords, turning their game into a sparring match. From the amount of snow clinging to Luke's cloak, it looked as if he was losing. The victorious carefree grin on Asch's face confirmed it. Guy was right. Natalia... she couldn't even remember the last time she'd seen him smile like that. "I suppose you're right," she finally conceded.

The Kimlascan Princess pulled her own cloak tighter around her. Just watching the boys was chilling her to the bone. She noticed that Tear also had her cloak tied tightly, though she had the added benefit of a little cheagle to help keep her arms warm.

"Luke really seems to like the snow," Tear commented.

"Well yeah, I guess you could say that," Guy replied. "We don't get a whole lot in Baticul so this is pretty exciting for him."

"There's so much of the world he's never seen," Tear said softly.

"Maybe, but I think that's true for anyone," Guy answered. "Yeah Luke's younger than he looks, but there are people who spend their entire lives in one village or area. You're a member of the Oracle Knights, so you have the benefit of being able to travel a lot, but most people don't have that chance. I think Luke's seen more of the world in his seven years than most people ever will in a lifetime."

"You're right, I'm sorry."

"Yeah," Anise agreed. "Until I traveled with you guys, I hadn't really seen too many places either. For being the Fon Master, Ion really doesn't get to go anywhere interesting. It's always the same boring cities."

"Well, let's catch up to those two and add Keterburg to the list, shall we?" Guy suggested.

"Yes," Natalia smiled. "Let's be on our way."

The snow was still falling gently as everyone made their way through Keterburg. The several extra pounds of water Luke had managed to accumulate in his winter cloak labelled Asch the victor in their little game, much to the younger sibling's dismay. Not that Luke had been completely defeated; his older brother was carrying around his fair share of excess water as well, but a win was still a win. It didn't take long for the two of them to abandon their cloaks altogether. While in the end it was probably the warmer of the options, but that didn't spare them the strange looks they were getting from the locals. Usually tourists bundled up to the point they looked ridiculous, what were those two doing in nothing but light jackets?
"So where should we start looking?" Anise asked. "He could be anywhere, right?"

"Excuse me," Asch stopped a man as he was walking by. "Could you point us in the direction of the Governor's house?"

"Who is the Governor of Keterburg?" Luke asked his best friend.

"That would be Nephry," the man replied for Guy. "Nephry Osborne. She lives in the house at the end of this street. It's on your right; there's a big sign, you can't miss it."

"Thanks," Asch nodded to the man who promptly continued on his way.

"So what do you want with the Governor of Keterburg?" Anise inquired sceptically.

"I think I get it," Guy answered. "Jade's a pretty big military figure, even if he doesn't have a really high rank. Not to mention the fact that he's with the Fon Master. If anyone is aware he's around, she would be."

"At the very least, it's a good place to start," Asch added, stopping in front of the house the man had indicated.

"Well he was correct in that we couldn't miss it," Natalia commented. The place they'd stopped before was quite the size, even given the fact it belonged to the governor; though from the looks of things it doubled as her office. The place still seemed rather quaint, not unlike the rest of the town. Natalia could easily see how this remote village had become such a renowned retreat. Tear was the first to knock on the door.

"I- I- I'm c- cold," Mieu shivered violently, turning his complaint into a fit of stuttering.

"Don't worry Mieu." Tear picked up the young cheagle and held him in her arms. "We'll get you inside and next to a fire soon. "Is anyone home?" the melodist called, knocking on the door again.

"May I help you?" A maid appeared at the door.

"Hello, we'd like to speak with the Governor if at all possible. Is she seeing people?"

"Certainly, right this way please," the woman opened the door wide and allowed them all entrance.

As soon as everyone got inside, they could see why it had taken so long for someone to answer the door. The front room was a complete mess. Books sat in stacks everywhere, furniture was shoved against walls and into corners haphazardly while lamps and other fixtures were scattered across the room. Only a small path was cleared to reach the back room, and presumably the office Nephry worked out of.

"Miss Nephry…" the maid opened the second door. "You have guests."

"Let them in," the voice came from within the room. Once the maid had bowed and moved out of the way, they could see the woman from which it had come. Unlike her house seemed to suggest, Nephry was well kept and very proper. Her golden brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail and glasses sat cleanly across her brown eyes. The white and black suit she wore was pressed and the desk behind which she sat didn't have a single pencil out of place. Anyone who didn't know better would think they'd stepped into a different world.

"You're Mrs. Nephry Osborne?" Natalia inquired upon entering.
"No, Osborne was the name of my late husband," the woman replied. "I'm Nephry Balfour, the Governor of Keterburg. Is there something I can help you with?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize," Natalia said softly. "I didn't mean to bring up a painful topic."

"It's alright," Nephry replied with a smile. "He died several years ago. I'm afraid I've yet to sort through his belongings in the front room though; I do apologize for the mess. Most people know to use the side door."

"Balfour…" Guy mumbled. "I'm sure I've heard that name before."

"I know!" Anise exclaimed. "Isn't that what Spinoza called the Colonel that one time in Belkend? He called him Jade Balfour."

"You know my brother?" Nephry asked curiously.

"Your brother?! You mean the Colonel is your brother?!"

"If you're referring to Colonel Jade Curtiss of Malkuth's 3rd division, then yes, he's my older brother."

"But wait a sec," Anise waved her hands. "How come the two of you have different last names?"

"My brother was adopted into the renowned Curtiss military family when he was young due to his exceptional talents. He's been in the military since that time."

"It's kind of funny," Luke commented. "You know, for all the time we've spent together, we really don't know much about him. I didn't know Jade was adopted."

"The old man doesn't like talking about himself," Asch added.

"That sounds like him, he's difficult to deal with on the best of days," Nephry chuckled.

"Any advice?" Asch inquired.

"Not a bit," the Governor replied and everyone laughed. A sad look dawned on the Colonel's little sister and everyone was silenced. "Tell me…" Nephry eventually managed. "Where is he now?"

"Actually, we were hoping you might be able to tell us," Tear spoke up. "Has he not stopped in to see you?"

"No, I haven't seen him since my husband's funeral," she said sadly. "Then I received word of Akzeriuth… His Majesty sent word that he'd survived but I didn't know if I could believe it or not."

"You don't trust Emperor Peony?" Natalia asked.

"I do, we've been friends ever since my brother and I were children, but it is because we're close I worry that he's lying to me. After losing my husband, I don't know if I could take losing my brother as well. He may just be trying to protect me from the truth."

"I wouldn't get your hopes up," Asch said with a bit of a grin. "You can't get rid of the old man that easily."

Though it took them awhile, Asch, with various contributions from everyone else, told Nephry the story of their journey. It hadn't been intentional, but the retelling gave everyone a chance to properly sort through everything that had happened to them recently. It was astounding how much
had happened so fast, and it didn't take long before their story became far more detailed than any of them had intended it to be.

"Yeah, I wouldn't worry," the redhead finally concluded. "Jade made it out of Akzeriuth just fine. We actually think he's somewhere here in Keterburg along with the Fon Master, but we have no idea where to look. Do you think you could help us with that?"

Nephry pondered the question for a moment, her face still bearing a great sadness. "Try south of town," she finally said. "There's a house down there, just on the edge of town that burnt down a long time ago. Regardless of what else he does, Jade always stops by there when he comes back home."

"Why there, may I ask?" Natalia inquired.

"That's something, I'm afraid, you'll have to ask him if you find him."

"Thanks," Asch smiled.

"Do me a favour though." Nephry added before anyone could leave.

"What's that?" The redhead asked.

"Please tell him to stop by before he leaves, and if you could, would you come along as well? There's something I'd like to speak with you about concerning my brother."

"Sure, we can all stop in before we leave town."

"No, just you."

Asch eyed the governor curious about her strange request. What could she possibly want to say to him? "Fine, I'll do my best to make it by."

"Thank you." Nephry smiled. "Best of luck with my brother," she waved gently from her seat as the group let themselves out.

"Because Score knows… you're going to need it."

The scorched timbers lay against each other, contrasting against the unbroken snow. Their ashes had long since been blown away by the winter storms, but the memories they left behind still lingered. The wood had been preserved by the frigid ice, as the lives that once inhabited this place were by those who still lingered in its ruins. Such people were just fools.

The cold wind tossed the Colonel's golden brown hair around, but didn't faze the man who stood solemnly ankle deep in the snow. The cold never bothered him, nor did the memories, or at least that's what he believed. It was fruitless to dwell on the past, all that ever came of it was hesitation. Humans were such strange creatures, always looking behind them and letting those regrets destroy their future.

But still this place held onto him, and refused to let him go. Perhaps he had never really escaped it to begin with.

"Jade," Ion's soft voice broke the silence. Perhaps the temperature didn't bother the Malkuth Colonel, but Ion for one wasn't used to these sorts of temperatures, and without any chance to dress
properly. "What is this place?"

"It's nothing of any importance," Jade replied. "I was simply curious if they'd cleaned things up yet, but it appears as if they haven't."

"If you'd like to see things all cleaned up, why not speak to the Governor here? I hear she's quite considerate."

"No, there's no hurry. There are far more important matters to tend to. I'm certain you need not be reminded that we're on a very tight schedule. There's no saying when the lands might fall."

"I see," Ion commented with a smile. "This place is important to you isn't it?"

"Not at all, it's an eyesore I'd like to see removed."

"Then what is it we're doing here?"

"That's something we'd like to know too," the familiar voice made both Jade and Ion turn around, one with more enthusiasm than the other.

"Asch, everyone, it's good to see you!" Ion's relieved smile shone through in spite of the cold. "I was concerned when we didn't leave word in Sheridan as to our whereabouts, but Jade didn't seem to think it was necessary. How did you find us?"

"That's something I would like to know as well," Jade cut in sternly.

"Hey!" Anise protested. "We spent a lot of time trying to track you down, don't give us that look. What do you think you're doing halfway across the world with Ion?"

"Perhaps I should ask you what you're doing here as well," the Colonel provided.

"Don't Jade," Ion said in Anise's defence.

"I'm sorry Ion." Anise's head hung down and she suddenly found herself unable to look at anything but the snow below her feet. "I- I didn't mean to hurt you, or to betray you. I know that isn't any excuse and I shouldn't even be here, but I really want to help you guys stop the Commandant and that pig Mohs! But if you want me to, I'll leave."

"No, that's fine Anise. You don't have to leave. You're no longer in my services, so you're free to do as you please. Follow your own path this time."

"What a touching reunion," the cackle sang tauntingly turning everyone's attention towards the ruined building. "And in the most appropriate of places, wouldn't you say so, Jade?"

"Dist!" Anise exclaimed her eyes landing on the overly extravagant God-General. Her anger, however, only lasted a second until the reality of what she was seeing sunk through her initial shock at his undesired presence. Then it was all she could do not to laugh.

She had always known Dist was a pansy, like, come on. The way he acted alone could send even the most serious Oracle Knights into fits of giggles, forget his wardrobe. But this… this was on a whole new level. Like, could anyone say pom-poms? They were hanging all over, from the end of his disgustingly pink hat to his matching pink mittens. The hood of his black jacket was lined with the same fuzzy pink stuff the pompoms were made out of, and his boots looked like some cotton candy had thrown up on them. The man was a walking fruit cake!
"I haven't the first clue what you're talking about," Jade sighed in mild annoyance, an unusual event in and of itself. Jade was always the first in line to push Dist's buttons. This time he wasn't provoking the man at all. "A stack of discarded firewood is hardly suitable for a reunion."

"Ohhhh," Dist's feet pounded furiously in the snow beneath his bright pink boots. "Don't you even start that! I won't let you pretend you've forgotten about the Professor!"

"What professor might that be?" Jade shrugged. "We've had a great many professors here in Keterburg, you'll have to be more specific than that."

"Heh." Dist straighten up his composure and took a more confident and taunting stance. "You may act all innocent but you know the truth. You haven't forgotten about Professor Nebilim! Otherwise you'd never have come here! Here to this place where you became a murderer."

"That's enough." Jade's face lost every trace of the nonchalant manner it had held just a minute ago. His red eyes burned with a fury none of them had ever seen before, but rather than intimidate the God-General before them, it only seemed to spur him on. That did it, Dist really was an idiot. And a dead one at that.

Luke couldn't help but watch the stare down between the Malkuth Colonel and the God-General. Murder? That wasn't right, that just didn't seem like Jade at all. Sure, Luke knew that Jade was a soldier and an excellent one at that. He was bound to have killed a lot of people in his life, but that was a battle, a war… death in war wasn't considered murder, and as stupid as Dist may be, Luke was sure he knew the difference.

"I knew you'd return someday, to this place," Dist continued. "This is where it all began, for you and for me. Admit it! You yearn for those times again, for those days long since past. Now finally after all these years, together, you and I can bring her back. We can return to how things used to be. You know better than anyone that fomicry can return her to this world, and then everything will be how it once was!"

"So… it was you that resurrected that forbidden technology in the first place. Why did you do it? That technology was forbidden for a reason!"

Everyone watched on in awe. Jade was angry, like genuinely angry. Not giving a disproving look or that awkward silence he somehow managed to create when he was upset at someone, but a raw fury that seemed to burn in his blood red eyes.

"Don't look at me like that," Dist spat. "I did it for the same reason you did, for the exact same purpose you had in mind when you created fomicry in the first place! You can pretend all you like, but I know the truth, you still want to see her again, to return to the olden days! That's why you'll never truly forbid fomicry! Not until together we've achieved our goal!"

"What?!" Anise's exclamation rang the loudest but it encompassed the feeling of just about everyone present. "Colonel… you invented fomicry?!"

Tear opened her mouth, wanting to ask a million questions at once, but couldn't find her voice. Jade… Jade had ties to fomicry as well? He'd invented it? Some how even as the thought grazed her mind; she couldn't get it to sink in. Suddenly everything she'd ever said to the man in blind hatred of the technology came back to her. How many times had she gone on about how much she hated whoever had come up with such a horrid thing? And here he had been sitting right there the entire time, listening to her every word! The melodist was so mortified she would give anything to sink into the snow and never crawl back out.
The man before them seemed to regain some of his former composure. "Yes," Jade eventually replied. "Even I had my young and foolish years, things I wish I could undo. But there's one mistake right now that I know I can fix," and with that implied threat alone, Jade drew his spear. His hateful gaze never once left Dist.

Everyone quickly followed suit and Dist's cockiness suddenly went down a peg. "Ha!" The God-General laughed, "You think you can beat me? The ever elegant, Dist the Rose?"

"Better look again Dist," Anise taunted. "You're way outnumbered."

The God General pulled a strange device from his bag. It was some kind of fon machine, but it was only about the size of a large ball. No way could he think a dinky thing like that would turn the battle in his favour. But with a creepy smile not even a mother could love, Dist held it up proudly showing it off to his enemies.

"No," the man said slyly, "you'd better look again!" And with that he slammed the machine down in the snow at his feet. A hiss of steam escaped the ball once it struck the snow.

The entire snow bank rippled, as if someone had thrown a pebble into a quiet pond. But rather than move outwards, the ripples suddenly congregated and swept over everyone's feet. Just what the hell did that crazy bastard think he was up to this time? Asch's eyes remained fixed on the snow waiting for some sort of grotesquely oversized and useless contraption to erupt from its endless white depths.

"Ow! What the hell was that?" It was Luke who cried out first. The redhead in question spun around only to see his friends, all staring at him with confusion and worry in their eyes. But on his leg lay the evidence of a strike, a long cut that stretched diagonally from his ankle to his knee. It wasn't deep or serious, but it did bleed. Natalia didn't waste anytime closing up his wound. She was the one to cry out next.

Soon everyone was stomping around in the snow, trying to find the invisible attacker. Tear and Natalia were doing their best to try and stay on top of the injuries but were quickly becoming overwhelmed. Dist's evil cackle echoed from his newfound perch on the burnt building.

"What the hell?" Guy swung his sword blindly at the snow. Suddenly the blonde felt something connect, and whatever it was, it went flying towards a nearby tree. "Guys over there!" The blonde called out as he continued to hack away.

Against the tree, in several different pieces was a small fon machine. It couldn't have been bigger than the blonde's thumb, but it was equipped with several small but sharp blades, already stained with blood.

"Yeah! Look there they are!" Anise pointed at the ground where everyone's footprints made the snow too shallow for the critters to hide. The ground itself almost seemed to be moving as they whistled about, cutting everything they approached.

"No fair!" The young Fon Master Guardian whined. "There's thousands of them! We can't destroy them all!"

"So what, you have a better idea?" Asch yelled as he started swinging at the machines he could see. The snow around them was already splattered with red as everyone's injuries accumulated.

"Haha! Who's outnumbered now? Behold my beloved Barreloow also known as Barries! Struggle all you'd like, but you'll never destroy them all in time. They have an almost endless supply of energy,
but your healers don't. Even the smallest injuries can add up and be fatal," the God-General crowed. "So keep running, run and beg, then maybe I'll have the grace to kill you myself."

"Not on your life you two faced pansy!" Anise stuck her tongue out and went back to swinging blindly in the snow from Tokunaga's back.

"You may be willing to suffer, but what about your friends?" Dist taunted, sending Anise on a frantic search of the area. Where was Ion?! The raven haired girl found him clinging to the branch of an evergreen, trying to keep his feet out of the snow. Blood ran down his hands where the needles dug into his skin but he wouldn't let go. He didn't want to be a burden on Natalia and Tear. They both had their hands full looking after everyone who was fighting; they didn't need the extra body to concern themselves over.

"Ion!" Anise hurried over to the Fon Master's side. "Here, get on Tokunaga!" The raven haired girl jumped down from her doll as Ion scrambled on top.

"But what about you, Anise?" The girl in question bit her lip as Dist's stupid little bugs started clipping at her legs.

"I'll be fine, you just stay on there!" Anise hurried back into the fray.

"Sacrificing yourself for the brat?" Dist laughed. "Just keep fighting, the longer you resist, the hungrier my Barries will become!"

"Having fun?" The point of Jade's spear found itself brushing the back of Dist's neck, leaving a red trail to mark its passage.

"Jade!" Dist suddenly turned meek. The tone in the Colonel's voice was nothing short of malicious, and even one so thick as Dist knew when their life was in danger. "You know you don't want to kill me."

"Call off your little pets," the Colonel commanded.

"I- I can't! Once they're unleashed they won't stop until they run out of power."

"Then perhaps you'd like to join them." Jade grabbed the God-General by the collar, pink fluff and all, and held him out over the rippling snow.

"No! Please don't!" Dist grabbed at Jade's wrists.

"Then you are going to tell me why you're really here," Jade's hateful stare pierced even Dist's dense skull and the God-General gulped. It was clear he was trying to decide which of the two fates was worse: dealing with Van after betraying his plans, or facing Jade's fury. The Colonel's grip loosened slightly and Dist slipped a little closer to the snow.

Jade's fury, definitely Jade's fury.

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"Damn it! This is useless, we aren't getting anywhere!" Guy yelled in frustration as he knocked another two bugs aside. No matter how many he smashed, five more seemed to take its place.

"Well what else are we supposed to do?!" Asch yelled back with an equal degree of frustration.

"Oh darkened storm cloud loose thy blade and run mine enemies through!"
The sudden burst of fonons caught both Asch and Guy's attention as Luke's arte crashed into the snow. The iridescent blade sent a pulse of electricity across the ground, short-circuiting every machine in its range and knocking out a hundred of the little bastards right where they stood.

Artes! Of course! Asch could have kicked himself for not trying it sooner, but he had been so focused on trying to keep the damn things at bay…

"You can get them with fonic artes!" Asch called out, unleashing an arte of his own. Noticing the sudden change in the tide of battle, Anise and Tear both switched strategies while Natalia stayed focused on healing. Guy, being the only member of their group with no knowledge of fonic artes, was left to hack away as he had been. But at least now it felt like they were making progress.

But why had it taken so long to figure that out? Asch's arte landed before him, melting a huge bunch of fon machines and taking the snow with it. Usually, if an enemy was susceptible to fonic artes, Jade would drop a hint… well as much of a hint as he ever offered, and they could adjust their strategy accordingly. Come to think of it, where the hell was the old man anyways?

"Tear, if you don't mind…" Natalia trailed off as she sank down in the snow, her panting betraying her depleted energy. She was simply too exhausted to continue, it took all the energy she had left to swing her bow at the few fon machines that were still scurrying about. What a dreadful foe! Who would have thought that something so small could cause such chaos? There hadn't been a battle this wearying in a great deal of time. That Dist was certainly proving to be more of a threat than his quirkiness seemed to suggest.

Tear quickly picked up the slack and continued to work on healing everyone's wounds. There were barely any fon machines left anymore, certainly not enough to merit the use of fonic artes. As fierce as they were in a swarm, they were equally harmless when there were only a handful of them. A good thing too, her own energy levels were starting to run low. But that wasn't going to stop her. A good soldier should never display that sort of weakness on the battlefield. The safety of her friends was more important than her own weariness or need for rest.

"That's enough Tear," Asch motioned for the melodist to stop. By then she was far too tired to even protest. "We'll be fine; the rest will heal on its own, or can wait for later."

"Asch is right," Luke agreed bringing his sword down on a fon machine at Tear's feet. Though they seemed able to sense enough to escape being stepped on, the little critters couldn't sense the fine point of a sword in time to escape that particular fate. The dazed melodist simply nodded. It was taking all her energy to stay conscious, she didn't even register what was being asked of her. Maybe she had gone a bit too far this time.

"How about you Ion? Are you okay?" Anise offered her hand to help the Fon Master down.

"I'm fine, thank you Anise."

"Well, that was the craziest fight we've had in awhile," Guy commented sheathing his blade. The blonde surveyed the area as he joined the others. The area around them that was once white and untouched was now beaten and spattered with red. Maybe it was just the contrast against the snow, but there seemed to be an awful lot of blood lost this time around. That and both girls were on the ground, completely spent from healing everyone. Just how serious things could have turned out was really starting to sink in. Who would have though Dist of all people could get them in such a pinch? "Good job thinking of using fonic artes Luke!" Guy said cheerfully, patting his best friend on the back. His attempts did nothing to dismiss the solemn atmosphere.

"I just wanted to try and get rid of as many as fast as I could," Luke explained.
"You know, speaking of fonic artes," Guy suddenly clued in. "Where's Jade? We really could have used his help this time around."

"The Colonel sure picked a bad time to be MIA," Anise commented.

"Who's missing now?"

"Jade, there you are," Ion spoke up in place of the startled Anise. "What happened to you during the last battle?"

"I do apologize." The Colonel pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. "But I had other matters to attend to."

Jade tossed the beaten and bloody body of Dist the Reaper into the center of the group, further tainting the once pristine white blanket beneath their feet. Only the steady rise and fall of his chest and the drool coming out of the corner of his mouth betrayed the fact that Dist was still among the living.

"What's this? Mercy from the Necromancer?" Asch taunted.

"If you'd like to kill him, by all means, be my guest." Jade waved his hand over the unconscious man. Asch scoffed and rolled his eyes but made no motion to take the God-General's life.

"So…" Anise eyed the two men standing over Dist. "What are you going to do with him if you don't plan on killing him?"

"Interrogate him," Jade replied simply. "Despite his claims, he was likely here for some other purpose than to ambush us. Once we know what the God-Generals are up to, I will have him arrested by local authorities."

"Works for me," Guy shrugged, followed by nods from the others. "But where are we going to take him? It's too easy for him to get away in the open like this, and I don't doubt some of those fon machines of his are still crawling around."

"The local inn should do just fine. I'm sure I don't need to point out to you that both our healers are thoroughly exhausted. Everyone here needs a good rest. We can simply lock him in a room there and interrogate him in the morning."

'Is it just me, or is Jade a little too comfortable with this?' Luke asked his sibling, doing nothing to hide the sceptical look on his face.

'Yeah, and resourceful,' Asch added. 'But I guess he does come from around here, it shouldn't really be much of a surprise.'

"So, uhhh," Guy broke the awkward silence, "how are we getting Dist back to the Inn?"

"Why you're going to carry him of course," Jade provided.

"What? No way! Why me?" Guy protested. "Can't Anise just bring him on Tokunaga?"

"And have him drool all over it? No way!" Anise stuck her tongue out and promptly placed the stuffed animal in question back on her back.

"What? Drooling… no…" Guy trailed off as he sighed in defeat.

"Well would you rather take over for one of the twins?" Jade asked maliciously. Guy looked up to
see Asch with Tear on his back and Luke doing his best to help the Princess to her feet.

Guy shuddered involuntarily. "No!" He sputtered before realizing the implications of his answer.

"Good then everyone is happy," Jade shrugged.

"Ugh," Guy buried his face in his palm, stealing a glance between his fingers at the unconscious God-General. At least it's not Arietta...or Legretta... or Cantabile.... Guy sighed as he tried to look at the bright side. But as he heard the man sigh and start to mumble in his induced slumber, the blonde could only hope the Inn wasn't going to be very far.

The fire crackled, sending embers up the chimney as Jade Curtiss stood before a window looking out over Keterburg. The common room on the third floor was cozy enough, housing a few couches, some plants and a wall of glass windows from which the soft light poured out into the night. Everything below seemed peaceful, and at the same time, stagnant. Nothing here ever moved, nothing here ever changed. Frozen in time like the tundra upon which it dwelt.

"What has you out here this time of night?" Asch asked, breaking the silence and stealing a spot next to the Necromancer.

"I could ask the same of you," Jade answered slyly. "And for the record, it isn't late. Sundown is simply much earlier this time of year than other places in the world."

"There's just something I wanted to ask you," Asch said seriously.

"Oh? The interrogation earlier regarding Dist's claims wasn't enough?"

"You essentially told us nothing," Asch shot back.

"I answered every one of your questions," Jade pointed out.

"Answering a question with a question doesn't count."

"It doesn't particularly matter, seeing as you knew everything already, didn't you?" Jade replied.

"I did," Asch conceded. "I read almost every one of your books on fomicry when I was a kid. I recognized the name Balfour right away."

"Well then, what is it you came to ask?"

"We spoke to your sister earlier today."

"Ah so you met Nephry," Jade commented. Asch could see the gears in Jade's mind turning, trying to deduce what the redhead had procured from that particular meeting. "I imagine she told you all sorts of nonsense about me, then?"

"Not really, we told her about everything that's been going on but at the time we were more concerned with finding you. She did ask me to come back later so we could talk. Any idea what she's planning on telling me?"

"I've a few ideas, especially given you told her about your involvement with fomicry. But before I tell you, tell your replica he can come out at any time."
"Sorry Jade," Luke replied sheepishly as he stood up from his spot behind the couch.

"No matter, talking to one of you is the same as talking to both of you anyway." The boys eyed Jade curiously, something the Colonel seemed to take a great deal of delight in. "You can hear through each other, can't you?" Luke and Asch looked at each other before simultaneously nodding. "And not just that I imagine." Jade pushed his glasses back up.

"Oh?" Asch's curiosity was piqued. "I take it it's a normal occurrence then?"

"No, not at all, it's the first I've ever heard of it. Though I'll admit you're the first perfect isofons I've encountered."

"Then how did you know?" Luke asked.

"It's just that the two of you make it so obvious," Jade said almost tauntingly. "It's part of the reason you can switch places so easily. It's only natural if you share your thoughts. But really, you shouldn't have switched on the trip to Grand Chokmah, poor Natalia worked so hard to impress Asch with her cooking." Asch snickered as Luke let out a shudder at that particular memory. And here they thought they'd manage to evade Jade's notice that time.

"Jade," Luke finally asked, "how come you invented fomicry in the first place? Did it have to do with the 'Professor' Dist was talking about?"

"No," Jade answered with a sigh. "The Professor Dist was referring to was a Professor Gelda Nebilim. But I had already developed the theory behind fomicry at that point. The very first replica, was a replica of a doll my sister had broken."

"You invented fomicry to fix your sister's toy?" Asch asked incredulously.

"To be precise, I developed fomicry as a way to replace her doll, without her having to sacrifice the toy she loved so dearly," Jade answered. "Of course, afterwards I continued to perfect the process, but that was the first successful attempt. If you really think about it, Tear's claims weren't entirely false. Fomicry was indeed born from pain and sadness."

"So how does this Professor Nebilim fit into the story?" Asch asked. "And why did Dist think you murdered her?"

"Because I did. Professor Nebilim's death was my doing."

"You're a worse liar than Luke," Asch commented. "You may be a lot of things old man, but you're not a murderer."

"You'd think differently had we met under different circumstances," Jade replied simply. "Don't underestimate the difference perspective can make on a persona. As a child the concept of life and death meant almost nothing to me. I constantly yearned for knowledge, to develop my skills, regardless of the cost to anyone or anything else. I was fascinated by the Professor and her healing artes. She was the first Seventh Fonist I had ever encountered. I had a great deal of respect for her abilities."

Asch came to a realization. "That house in the clearing, it was hers, wasn't it?"

"Not precisely," Jade answered. "I had gone there to practice with the Seventh Fonon. Of course, I am not a Seventh Fonist, and I had no capacity to control the Seventh Fonon. The arte went out of control and Professor Nebilim got caught in the crossfire. The building then caught fire and burnt down. That was where we encountered Dist earlier."
"No..." Luke shook his head in disbelief still wrapped up in Jade's tale.

'It's hard to believe isn't it?' Asch commented.

'Yeah, I mean, the Seventh Fonon always seemed ... I don't know, gentle.'

'That's because our fonon frequency is the Seventh Fonon. Think of a hyperressonance, if it's not handled properly, it can be very destructive.'

"Are we finished now?" Jade eyed the boys disapprovingly. Luke gave Jade an apologetic look and the Colonel seemed satisfied enough to continue.

"Before she died, there was just enough time left. I extracted her replica data. I thought that there still may be a chance to save her."

"Did you ever make a replica?" Asch asked.

"Only once, but the creature born was a monster and in the end I had to kill it as well."

"I'm so sorry," Asch said sincerely.

"You don't... you know..." Luke fumbled. "You're not still trying to make a replica, are you?"

"No," Jade answered. "You, Luke, of all people should understand. A replica has no memories of the past, or of their original's former life. I've wanted to beg for the Professor's forgiveness, so that I might feel better, but a replica can't give me what I want. A replica can't forgive me."

Silence fell over the lobby, broken only by the crackling of the fire.

"So why did you tell us all this?" Asch finally inquired.

"I think, of all people, you deserve to know how fomicry was born. It goes without saying that this is to remain between us. The first person to tell can apologize to the real Professor Nebilim on my behalf, in person. Now that we're in agreement..." Jade continued a sly grin finding its way onto his face. "Perhaps you can answer my question."

"What's that?" Asch said, refusing to back down before the Colonel's inquiry.

"How is it the God-Generals were able to distinguish the two of you? They knew not to kill Asch, meaning they must have been sure who they had in their custody. How?"

"I'm still surprised you haven't noticed," Asch said with a mischievous grin.

"Well seeing as your fiancée and your best friend," Jade said turning to Luke, "aren't aware. It can't be particularly obvious."

Asch scowled as Jade ruined his fun causing Luke to snicker. Rolling his eyes, Asch turned around and pulled his hair back into a ponytail. It was faint, but just above the hairline on his neck was a long scar. To emphasize his sibling's point, Luke turned around and did the same, revealing no markings of any kind.

"It happened during the kidnapping," Asch explained. "Sometime after Luke was born, I was trying to figure a way to pull the bars out of my little makeshift cell, but I fell and hit my head on the rocks. It healed up before I made it home but Van would know it happened. I figure that's probably how the God-Generals knew."
"You're likely correct in that assumption," Jade agreed. Luke stifled a yawn. "It's been a long day; I think it's time you were off to bed. We'll be getting an early start in the morning, late sunrise or not."

Luke nodded and allowed Asch to usher him from the room. Jade turned to face the window again, watching the reflections of the redheads in the glass as they made their way towards the hall. Asch paused for a moment before he left the room.

"Jade, why did you really come to Keterburg?"

"Hmph," Jade smiled and closed his eyes as he adjusted his glasses.

"Don't push your luck."
The frigid morning air was as cold as it had been the previous day, and the melodist's breath was as visible as the snow that had found its way into her hair. It wasn't something she was particularly happy with, especially when she'd much have preferred to hide the shortness of her breath. That sort of thing seemed to happen a lot more often lately; she kept finding herself in the strangest situations. The weirdest part of it all, was just how much she was starting to enjoy it. Tear quickly sidestepped letting the small ball of snow and ice skim by her, just missing her shoulder by an inch. What in Yulia's name had she let Luke drag her into this time?

Though the responsible, mature side of her just screamed at the sheer nonsense of it all, a small part of her deep down just relished in the joy and simplicity of a snowball fight. Next to her, Luke hurled a snowball at his original and the melodist's attacker. The other redhead dodged the white bullet and bolted ahead, preparing a counterattack. In spite of her reservations, Tear found herself laughing aloud as she fled from Anise's ensuing assault.

It had started so innocently, Luke hit Asch in the back with a snowball. Of course, Asch being… well Asch, couldn't let his younger counterpart have one up on him, and had returned the favour. Now it was an all out war with her, Luke, Guy and Ion against Asch, Anise and Natalia. They had all rolled their eyes at first, but it had only taken a few stray shots before they had jumped right in. That was of course, with the exception of the Colonel.

Jade remained perfectly neutral in their little war and very clearly annoyed with everyone's antics. But they made sure to keep moving along, so he had no reason to complain. As long as they continued to move at a pace he deemed sufficient, he remained silent. They certainly made enough noise to keep many of the lesser monsters at bay, and the few that did attack them merited a temporary ceasefire while they were dealt with. There was no compromise whatsoever to their usual performance or progress, they were just having some fun along the way. Tear for the life of her couldn't figure out why Jade was so irritated.

Another annoyed sigh escaped the Malkuth Colonel and Luke just rolled his eyes. What was Jade's problem? He'd been uptight all day. Scratch that, he'd been uptight since they found him in Keterburg. Luke felt bad for Iemon and the others in Sheridan if this was any indication of Jade's mood over the past week. What was so wrong with a snowball fight? No one was getting hurt, and they were still making progress... besides, he was the one that had everyone up at some unholy hour.

Luke wasn't going to ask, hell, he didn't even want to know. Whatever Jade did to Dist in that room could stay secret until the end of time. He would sleep much better at night not knowing what the so-called Necromancer was capable of doing that could elicit such screaming and pleading from a God-General. Note to self, take Jade's threats of torture more seriously in the future. But whatever the method, he couldn't deny they had found out some key information...Luke just didn't see why it had to be done so early in the morning! Or why they all had to set out to the passage ring on Mt. Roneal the minute Jade was done.

Apparantly the reason Dist had been in Keterburg was because Master Van had some kind of plans for the passage ring here, or at least he must, since he had sent the God-Generals. Jade then, of course, proceeded to explain that the passage ring here was the reason for his unexpected trip to Keterburg. While it was true that they needed an unaltered passage ring to take the measurements they needed, Luke could tell that Asch didn't buy Jade's excuse for a second, and neither did he. Especially after everything Jade had told them last night. There had to be more to this, but whatever
it was, Jade wasn't going to tell them anytime soon.

"Whoa!" Luke stumbled forward, just barely evading the small white ball that was aimed at his head. He then shot Asch an evil glare for taking advantage of him while he was lost in thought. Asch could use all the dirty tricks he wanted, but they had the secret weapon: Ion. Even Asch wouldn't attack the young Fon Master. No one would tell him to sit out either; after all, he was having as much fun as the rest of them.

The Kimlascan Princess shivered, snow was beginning to fall now that they were getting higher. The air was beginning to thin and was slowly becoming more frigid. The climbing sun did little to warm the icy mountain terrain and the further they got, the deeper the snow that fought against their advance became. But everyone remained in good spirits, the deeper snow only meant there was more to make snowballs out of, and it slowed the monsters as much as it slowed them so it posed little growing threat. Rather, the whole event was keeping everyone entertained and in a far greater mood then they likely would have been had Luke not come up with this silly little game of his. Even Natalia couldn't deny that, but it left her to wonder how much longer this could possibly last. If the path ahead was any indication, it wouldn't be much longer. Even from where she was, she could see it was blocked by a large snowdrift.

Sadly Natalia's predictions turned out to be quite accurate and the whole group found themselves without a way to proceed. They had come quite a ways up and the view was nothing short of breath taking. It was a bit nerve-wracking as well; Natalia took a deep breath as she peeked down over the nearby ledge. It went down far deeper than the eye could see, and though the Princess never had a problem with heights, she certainly didn't want to be the first to discover how deep the crevice truly went.

But it seemed no one was quite sure exactly how to put a stop to their game. After coming this far no one wanted to be the first to step down, and certainly not to be the first to leave themselves open to attack. So it continued, with a slowly simmering Jade attempting to identify any alternate routes up the mountain. Someone really ought to be assisting him, but they were making rather good time so there wasn't any particular sense of urgency yet. Judging by the Fon Master's level of energy, it was just about time for a break anyway.

At first none of them were quite sure who had thrown it, but the snow still clinging to Jade's cloak clearly marked where the stray shot had landed. Everyone fell silent, warily eyeing the Colonel. His displeasure at their behaviour hadn't gone unnoticed. Anise shrunk back identifying herself as the culprit, backing into the shelter of a nearby pine. Jade turned around, adjusting his glasses as he always did when he was composing himself. The look in his eyes was lethal.

"I think that's just about enough of your childish antics." Jade's words didn't seem unusual but the threatening tone had even Asch in line. "Or have you forgotten that the ground beneath your feet could collapse any moment? But I'm certain the handful of survivors would forgive you for the deaths of millions. You were having fun, after all."

"You don't have to say it like that Colonel," Anise shot back. "Besides, Luke started it!"

"Need I remind you that Luke is 6 years your junior?" Jade replied, without the usual hint of amusement he held when he was teasing one of them. Anise grumbled something inaudible in reply. With no further protests, Jade quickly divided and organized them in order to do a thorough search of the area.

Anise glared at the Colonel out of the corner of her eye. What was his problem, anyway? Junior or not, Luke had started it! Why was he staring at her like the whole thing was her fault! The former Fon Master Guardian turned towards the redhead who was looking for a path over by the edge. She
really hoped Luke wouldn't find one. Flying in the Albiore was bad enough! She was not going tiptoeing along the edge of a cliff!

Yet, as she watched Luke, she realized just how hard it was to believe he was younger than she was. Yeah she knew he was a replica and only seven and all, but he looked the same age as Asch, and really, for the most part, acted the part amazingly well. It was just so strange to see someone who could grow up so much in so little time. Then again, Anise giggled as somehow one last snowball caught Asch in the side, maybe he wasn't so grown up after all.

But before the older redhead could make any sort of comeback and get the Colonel mad at them all over again, something caught his attention and Asch froze on the spot. Anise stopped too, listening carefully for what had Asch's attention. All around her, the others had all stopped leaving nothing but the faint sound of the wind as it started to pick up. Then she heard it, deep growls and the sound of snow being thrown aside. She looked up at the snow bank; they were surrounded by a pack of wolves!

Unlike many of the monsters they had encountered on the way up the mountain, this foe was more than agile in the knee deep snow and immediately had the group at a disadvantage. Their snow white fur coats allowed them to effortlessly blend into their surroundings, making them next to impossible to spot unless you were looking right at them. And everyone knew wolves were smart, this wasn't going to be easy.

Natalia jumped aside as one of the wolves tried to pounce on her, barely evading the creature's sharp claws. She spun around, landing an arrow neatly through the wolf's leg causing it to yelp in pain. One of its comrades came between the Princess and her target, snarling as the injured beast retreated. That was one down, but there were easily a dozen or more left.

Everyone seemed to be fairing rather well, no one had sustained any serious injuries and Natalia was quick to heal some of the scratches she could see from the sidelines. The Princess had no intentions of getting in the fray. That was where Luke, Asch, Guy and even Anise's talents shone best; her abilities made her more suited for attacks from a distance. Natalia backed up a few feet before notching another arrow. She aimed, and the arrow landed in another wolf's side.

Natalia backed up again as she drew the attention of another pair of the beasts. Tear's arte crashed between the wolves and the Princess forcing the creatures back and making them reconsider their target. She nodded a thanks at the melodist and notched another arrow. The fray was starting to get too close, and Natalia retreated a bit more. It was becoming difficult to aim amongst the flurry of movement; the last thing she wanted to do was hurt one of her friends.

But that flurry of movement was all around her now. Several of the wolves had decided she alone would be an easy target and the others had come to her aid, bringing the rest of the fight with them. They were down to a handful of the beasts now, but the remaining creatures refused to succumb to their weapons, and refused to retreat. Natalia managed to break free of the chaos and retreated a few feet, readying her arrow. The Princess took a step back as she pulled back on her bowstring. Her back foot shifted, just enough to adjust her balance, but that was all it took. Natalia found herself scrambling when a small slip put her foot above nothing but air. One glance backwards nearly stopped her heart. She had backed herself all the way to the edge of the cliff.

Natalia turned around again but only managed to take a single step forward. The wolf stood a few feet away snarling at her, poised to attack. Natalia raised her bow and pulled it taut but the wolf remained there, baring its fangs. Why didn't it try to attack her?

A huge crack split through the air echoing in what seemed like silence in spite of the nearby scuffle. The world was suddenly quiet. Natalia's eyes widened as she realized it was the ice beneath
her feet. Everything happened as if it was in slow motion, the wolves’ retreat, everyone running

"Natalia! Watch out!" The young Princess felt a warm set of arms wrap themselves around her.

Then everything went black.

"Ugh," Natalia groaned as she lifted her head. Everything was cold and sore, her entire body was

Natalia took a moment to orient herself. She was lying on an outcropping of rock, maybe 30 feet or

"Are you alright?"

"Luke!" Natalia suddenly noticed the person she was lying on top of. "What are you-

"I tried to grab you when you fell and ended up falling too," the redhead explained as if it was the

"Are you alright?"

"Luke!" A voice echoed in the crevice, coming from above them.

"Natalia!" A second voice. "Are you guys okay?! If you can hear us answer us!" It sounded like

"We're okay!" Luke yelled back. "I suppose I shouldn't be answering for you," Luke realized with

"You're such… You're such an idiot!" Natalia's fist pounded against the young noble's chest who

"Are you…crying?"

"Why would you do something so stupid?" Tears leaked from Natalia's eyes. She didn't

"Well, you didn't mean to right? You didn't know they wanted to kill me, you were just doing what

"But still!"
"Look, Natalia, I'm not going to lie and say that what you did didn't hurt me, but even so, you're still my cousin, you're still a part of my family. I would never just leave you to die if there was something I could do."

"But I..." Natalia had no words to say. Seven or not, she had been completely and utterly defeated by her cousin. Never once had she thought that way. Luke was always Asch's replica, someone to whom she showed courtesy, but deep down, he was never truly one of them. Natalia wiped her tears.

"Umm, Natalia, I don't mind chatting with you and all, but do you think you could hop off?"

"My goodness, I'm sorry!" The Princess scrambled off, her cheeks becoming even redder than the cold had made them. Both young nobles brought themselves to their feet and brushed off the snow. "So what now?"

"I'm going to see about climbing back up," Luke answered. "It looks like there's a path that leads back up the cliff. I'm going to check it out." Natalia noticed the 'path' that Luke was talking about. It was nothing more than a narrow ledge, and one full of ice at that.

"No, it's far too treacherous! What if you slip and fall?"

"Do you have any better ideas?"

"Then I'll come with you."


"Why should only I remain here? I am just as capable as you are; there is no reason for me to be left behind like some child to be rescued."


"Then what was it supposed to mean?!"

Luke simply pointed at the rock wall behind her. Half hidden by the ice that made its home against the rock face, was what looked like some kind of entrance. Natalia walked up to the strange door in the rock wall as ran her fingers across it. The multitude of colours was simply exquisite.


"Yes, it appears to be a seal of some kind," Natalia confirmed as she returned to her original place near Luke.

"I've only ever seen a seal like that once before," Luke answered. "It was guarding the entrance to Akzeriuth's Sephiroth. I'd be willing to bet that's the Daathic seal we were looking for. So I'm going to go get the others and show them the way down here. There's no point in you risking your life to go up there only to come right back down."

"You're right I'm sorry," Natalia admitted, ashamed of herself for automatically assuming Luke was looking down on her. "Do be careful."

"Don't worry I will. I'll be right back with Asch and the others," the redhead answered with a goofy grin. Natalia walked up to him and placed her hands against his chest. "W-What are you doing?" Luke suddenly became flustered.
"At least let me heal some of your injuries before you start climbing," the Princess mumbled.

"Thank you," Luke smiled as he felt the Seventh Fonons seep up the pain and slowly drain it all away. Leave it to Natalia to have noticed. "I'll be right back," he said, stopping her before she drained herself completely.

Natalia nodded and could only watch as Luke slowly made his way up the cliff face. The old path he was walking on seemed even narrower as she watched him inch along, very carefully placing one foot in front of the other. It wound around several times and her neck was very sore but she couldn't bring herself to take her eyes off him. It felt as if she looked away, he would fall.

Luke's cry filled the air and stopped Natalia's heart. A small section of the path had given way under him, and he was barely hanging on!

"Luke!" Natalia instinctively ran in his direction, but before she had taken five steps, he had lost his grip. Luke fell 10 feet, landing in a heap in the snow. "Luke! Luke are you okay?" Natalia ran towards the redhead. Oh please let him be okay… if he wasn't…

A patch of ice caught Natalia off guard and the young Princess once again found herself on top of her cousin. She would have been embarrassed, but the sound of his breathing filled her with such a sense of relief. He wasn't... he wasn't…

"Natalia, what's the matter?" Luke opened to find Natalia clinging to his cloak, sobbing into the cold fabric. "Why are you so upset?"

"I thought you were going to fall and die," Natalia managed through her sobbing. "I'm so sorry- I'm sorry for everything! I never wanted to hurt you, I never wanted see anything bad happen to you… I've already- I've already lost Asch, I don't want to lose you too!"

"Natalia, it's okay, I'm fine." Luke sighed and gently wrapped his arms around the crying girl. "You haven't lost Asch," he whispered into her ear.

"You're wrong," Natalia's sobbing continued with a renewed intensity. How long had she kept these feelings, these emotions locked inside of her? How she had longed for someone to confide in, for someone to just listen. But she had betrayed them all, she had betrayed Luke; she didn't have that right… but the words came just the same. "Asch hates me. With everything I did, the way I betrayed him, the way I treated you…who can blame him? He has every right to feel that way. I never once stopped to think how he was feeling or what he might be going through. I only ever thought of myself, and at a time when he needed me the most. Now… he won't even look at me anymore."


"Of course he does."

"No, he doesn't. But even though you didn't mean to hurt him, you still did. He feels hurt and betrayed just like you said. But he still loves you; he just needs time to deal with his feelings. He needs time to heal... and he needs you."

"Me?"

"He needs you to show him that you still really care about him, and that you still want to be at his side. He needs you to not give up on him."

Natalia laid her head down against Luke's chest and wrapped her arms around him. "I think I
understand now," she said quietly. She could see why Luke held such a special place in Asch's heart… and in her own as well. For all that it seemed arguing was the only thing the two of them were good for, Luke was still precious to her. He was family after all.

"Understand what?"

"Nothing."

"Well, I think it's time for me to give climbing another try," Luke finally said when Natalia had let go.

"Wait, Luke."

"I know Natalia, but we have to find a way for the others to get down here, it's way too dangerous for them to try and climb down blindly. At least while going up I can see where I'm supposed to be going."

"That's not what I was going to say," Natalia protested.

"Then what is it?"

"Could you ever accept my apology? Not just for what happened, but the way I've treated you all this time?"


"Then please be careful," Natalia finished. "I'll be waiting for you."

"Then I'll be right back."

Luke's second ascent up the face of the cliff was a great deal more successful than his first, though the latter had his brother pacing in worry. Asch had practically jumped when they heard Luke fall; no surprise, it had them all worried, but he managed to make it up just fine. While there were many complaints on Anise's behalf, there was no doubt in Ion's mind that what Luke had described was, in fact, a Daathic Seal and so everyone braved the journey down the cliff face to join Natalia waiting patiently on the ledge.

It had been awhile since Ion had to open the door to one of the Sephiroth. It made him uneasy knowing what he was opening up to the world but at the same time, he knew it was necessary. The Sephiroth were going to fall regardless of whether they acted or not. The difference left to them to make would be how many would survive when the world as they knew it came crashing down. At the very least they had the power to save those lives. Van would not have his way, not while he had the power to do something about it.

The Fon Master wobbled a bit and was quickly supported by Luke who had been standing behind him. He had forgotten just how draining opening these doors could be. Ion closed his eyes, trying to get his head to stop spinning. Jade was right; they didn't have any time to waste. It was already past noon, and no one fancied trying to get back up that cliff in the dark. At least with the seal still intact they knew that the God-Generals hadn't found the entrance yet.

The tunnels inside the mountain weren't any more inviting than the ledge on which they had found the entrance. It was dark and difficult to see even with the makeshift torches they had put together.
Occasionally they'd come across a snow drift from where part of the tunnel had caved in and the snow had entered, but so far nothing that stopped their advance. Not that Jade would have let them stop anyway, even if they had to dig the entire way there. For whatever reason, he seemed more determined than ever and the fact that none of the God-Generals had made it here did nothing to appease his sense of urgency.

Everyone was relieved when they finally found themselves surrounded by the familiar glow of fonic glyphs. In terms of beauty, Mt. Roneal more than lived up to all the passage rings before it. The size of the caverns they were in was only now becoming evident as the light danced up the ever rising walls and around rooms that could rival even Baticul's audience chamber in terms of grandeur.

Something about the passage rings had always unnerved Asch, the same way they put his brother in such awe. Perhaps it was just the fact that so much was riding on what they did with the Sephiroth. Being here just reminded him of everything that was at stake, and just how much they couldn't afford to screw up. But that knowledge only made the sinking feeling worse as they turned to corner to find an unexpected, and unwelcome figure standing before the passage ring.

"Sync!" Anise yelled, charging the green-haired God-General. Though caught somewhat off guard, Sync still effortlessly dodged her blow and put some distance between him and the unexpected intruders.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised that you're here," Sync shrugged off the flaming former Fon Master Guardian. "That Dist is worse than useless. Honestly, he was assigned to this mission because he knows the area, but he still manages to screw things up."

"What are you doing here?" Asch demanded. "How did you get in?"

"I see no reason to answer your question," the God-General replied, a smug grin visible under his mask.

"Well whatever you're doing here, it can't be anything good!" Guy shouted.

"That depends entirely on what perspective you're coming from Gailardia Gardios. To those of us who want to save this world, it's of vital importance."

"Yeah right! You're the ones trying to drop the Outer Lands!" Luke protested. "You're going to destroy the world, not save it!"

"A means to an end; a necessary one at that. But I wouldn't expect a replica like you to understand."

"Yeah, so what if I'm a replica?" Luke shot back.

"The garbage is proud of what it is I see. Pathetic," Sync spat. "You were born simply to be cast away, we both know it. So you can sit there and give yourself all the self-serving purpose you want, but it doesn't change that you're nothing but trash that just hasn't been taken out yet."

"You're wrong!" Tear cut in. "Luke's not like that at all! He has just as much right to be here as anyone else. That's what you and my brother can't seem to understand. People, replicas… they're not just some toys to be discarded when you please! That makes you no better than the people you condemn!"

"Aren't we arrogant? You think that little spiel of yours means a damn thing? You don't know anything. That's why you'll never be able to free this world of the Score, and unless you can do
that, this world is doomed to die. To make change, there has to be sacrifice. Those who still cling to former ideals will be weeded out. Not a single trace of the Score will remain in this world. Then and only then will it be free of Yulia's curse. If you won't back down, then I have no choice but to eliminate you all here and now."

"You wouldn't dare," Asch shot back.

"Don't be so full of yourself. You think you're worth that much to Van? Your value is dwindling down by the second. His plans are bigger than anything you could possibly grind to a halt by throwing away that worthless life of yours. You obviously have no plans of cooperating with us, and that makes you worse than useless. You can go out with the rest of the trash."

Sync launched himself at Asch and the young noble was hard pressed to get his sword up in time. Speed was definitely the God-General's greatest asset, not that his blows were to be taken lightly either. Though he fought without any sort of weapon, he could still match blows with the redhead, as well as with Luke and Guy who had joined the fray. Three on one and they still couldn't so much as touch him… could he really be that much beyond them?

Jade's arte forced Sync back, easily sidestepping Natalia's arrows as he retreated a few feet. Asch barely had the chance to gather himself before he was on the defensive again. Sync's ability to dodge and to block a sword with nothing but his hands had him amazed. He'd venture to say Sync was better than Van in those regards, and Asch knew that he didn't stand a chance in hell against his former instructor, even with all the progress he'd been making. It didn't do much for his confidence on the outcome of this battle. But Asch still had a card up his sleeve, now if only they could pull it off.

'Luke, you ready?' Asch managed while Guy drew some of Sync's attention.

'Yeah, are you leading or am I?'

'I will. When he's distracted by Jade's next arte.'

'Got it.'

Luke watched carefully as he avoided Sync's blows. One caught him in the arm and pain shot all the way up to his shoulder. Tear was quick to heal his injury but the memory of the pain lingered a few more seconds. Sync's abilities were nothing to joke about. A couple of those to more critical spots and he'd be beyond repair. That knowledge only made him more nervous. Could he and Asch really pull this off? Luke knew they'd practiced it and all, but if they screwed it up, Sync could easily put both of them out of the running. But Luke didn't have time to hesitate, Jade's incantation rang out in the cavern loud and clear.

Giant spires of stone erupted out of the earth beneath Sync's feet. The God-General hopped backwards dodging the path of each spire as it shot out of the ground. Luke grinned at the arte Jade had chosen, perfect!

'Go!'

Asch and Luke both rushed forward rebounding off the stone as they pursued their opponent. Luke closed his eyes for a moment, feeling the flow of Asch's movements. He followed Asch's lead, mirroring his sibling's motions perfectly. When the first strike landed, they could tell they'd caught Sync off guard, not that it stopped him from blocking their attack, but it was encouraging, and they were far from over. Luke quieted his thoughts, allowing his movements to flow naturally. He didn't think about what he was doing, he didn't let himself react; he just followed Asch's lead. They
couldn't afford to screw this up. It was reminiscent of the time he'd spent in Asch's consciousness, only this time he was in his own body, but he still was letting Asch's thoughts control his movements.

The perfect timing of their simultaneous attacks was beginning to overwhelm Sync. His face betrayed his distraction; he was trying to figure out how it was possible to time attacks so precisely. Then he made his first mistake: he assumed it was a routine. The next attack was readable, and Sync made his move, dodging at the last second and motioning to attack, a smug grin already on his face; they couldn't possibly react the same way. But still in perfect sync, they feinted around behind the God-General; they both felt their swords connect.

Not a fatal blow by any means. Sync had still managed to react at the last second and the damage was minimal. He was on the defensive now, all his attention consumed on blocking both strikes at once. Combined with the fact that Sync had to identify the direction of the flat of the sword in each attack in order to block or knock it away, he was quickly becoming overwhelmed. His guard broke! Luke and Asch went for the finishing blow.

A clinging noise echoed in the vast chamber. Sync managed to evade their strike, but only barely. The upswing caught the God-General's mask and sent it flying across the room. Asch felt Luke regain his own control and both of them were mentally exhausted. A useful tactic, but wearying beyond belief; and now wasn't the time to rest. They hadn't finished the fight, not by a long shot. At least they'd worn him out; they could hear Sync's breath as he tried to recover as quickly as possible.

That was when Asch and Luke looked up, and they discovered why Sync the Tempest always wore a mask. Though his green hair was spiked and he was wearing the uniform of a God-General, his face was utterly unmistakable.

"What the hell?!" Guy lowered his sword in shock.

"No way…" Anise shook her head in disbelief. "There are two Ions?!"

*I see now,* Ion spoke up. "It's as I thought, you're a replica of the Fon Master as well."

"Wait, Ion, what do you mean as well?" Luke asked. "You're not…"

"That's right, I'm Fon Master Ion's seventh and final replica. I'm sorry for deceiving you all. In actuality, I was only born two years ago."

"So you're a replica too," Asch commented. "I guess that explains how Sync used a Daathic fonic arte on Guy. So," Asch turned to Sync, "Van felt he needed his own personal Fon Master? Is that it?"

"Hardly," Sync spat. "The original Ion was a weakling...pathetic really."

"He was sick and bordering on death," Ion explained. "Since there was no successor, Van and Mohs used fomicry."

"And you had the closest abilities to the original," Sync continued. "Unlike the rest of us trash."

"Don't talk like that," Luke shot Sync a dirty look.

"It's what I am," Sync shot back. "My powers were weak, so I was cast into the fires of Mt. Zaleho along with the others. A replica who can't act as a replacement has no value whatsoever."
Weak? *That* was weak? Luke was still trying to catch his breath and didn't even want to fathom what Sync considered 'strong'. In between resting breaths, Luke was still trying to process everything. It was so hard to believe, Ion was a replica too… all this time?

"Replica or not, you're still alive," Asch said. "You're not just some throw away."

"What would you know?" Sync said with a nasty glare.

"I know plenty," Luke cut in. "Being a replica doesn't mean you're worth any less than anyone else."

"Shut up! You have people that need you; you don't know a damn thing! I'm only alive so Van can use me. Only those of us that are useful are kept alive out of pity."

"That's not true," Ion pleaded. "You and I are the same, why don't you come with us? We can show you… you're worth more than what you think you are."

"Never!" In a burst of speed Sync flew through the group, everyone spun around, bracing for his attack, but it never came. "I'm here for one reason and one reason only."

"That's not true," Ion pleaded. "You and I are the same, why don't you come with us? We can show you… you're worth more than what you think you are."

"Never!" In a burst of speed Sync flew through the group, everyone spun around, bracing for his attack, but it never came. "I'm here for one reason and one reason only." Without elaborating he backed into the darkness of the tunnels.

"Damn!" Asch cursed. "We're going to be at a huge disadvantage against him in the dark."

"I have a better idea," Jade said simply, and with a few words, an arte crashed down knocking out the roof of the tunnel and completely blocking the entrance.

"Jade! What are you doing?!" Guy demanded. "We have to get back out of here!"

"Sync got in here somehow, and he didn't use the same passage we did," Jade calmly explained. "I'd venture to guess a tunnel completely caved in somewhere, which is how he got here without removing the Daathic seal."

"Makes sense, I guess," Anise shrugged. "I don't like it though, what if he just snuck past us?"

"Then we dig," Jade answered.


"We'll find our way out later," Jade continued, his tone short and annoyed. "For now let's concern ourselves with the passage ring, shall we?"

Though not happily, everyone followed Jade over to the passage ring. Tear took her place by the pedestal and the familiar glyph opened up above them. There were red rings around all the Sephiroth now, except for two: the Absorption Gate and the Radiation Gate.

"So how do we take this measurement of yours, old man?" Asch asked.

"This device needs to be touched to the fonon flow," Jade answered. Asch snatched the device from Jade's hand and proceeded to do just that. The fon machine beeped and a multitude of numbers appeared on a small display indicating it had gotten the information it needed.

"That was pretty anticlimactic," Anise mumbled.

"I don't know about you, but Sync was more than enough climax for me," Natalia commented and was rewarded by a chuckle from Anise.
"It still so hard to believe, you know?"

"You mean, Ion being a replica?" Natalia asked.

"Yeah." Anise's voice was quite solemn for a change.

"I know how you feel; it certainly came out of nowhere. And for someone of such stature as well," Natalia commented. The young Princess had no problem with this fact. Despite her treatment of Luke, she really didn't hold any negative feeling towards replicas. At least not in the way Tear did. Oh dear, she certainly hoped Ion hadn't interpreted that the wrong way.

For a long time Natalia felt that being so young, Luke wasn't ready for the responsibilities he held. She was starting to see just how wrong she had been, the maturity that had been born from the death of his innocence. Still, the thought of the entire Order of Lorelei in the hands of a boy no older than two was mind boggling. Natalia knew better than to give in to such notions, Ion had shown he was more than capable of handling all his responsibilities. It left the Princess to wonder what price the young boy had paid for such maturity.

"I'm sorry for lying to you all this time," Ion spoke up, surprising both girls. They hadn't even noticed him standing behind them.

"It's alright," Natalia replied. "I can understand why you'd want it to be kept a secret. You're not much different from Luke in that regard."

"No I suppose not," Ion smiled weakly.

"It's fine by me too," Anise agreed. "After all the lying I did to you, I have no right to get mad at you for hiding it from me."

"It would be pretty bad if I had a problem with it," Asch commented with a chuckle as he handed the machine back to Jade.


"Thank you all." Ion's smile was genuine this time.

"So," Luke continued staring up at the glyph on the ceiling. "Can someone tell me something?"


"Well, I thought Master Van couldn't get to passage rings that Ion hasn't opened yet. Why does it look like he's been to them all?"

"He hasn't," Jade provided.

"Then why are those red-"

"The red rings around the Sephiroth don't solely indicate the code Van used," the Colonel cut Luke off.

"So Van wasn't at the other passage rings either?" Asch spoke up, trying to follow Jade's train of thought.

"No, I believe he was at the previous Sephiroth, however, our thought that he was somehow accessing the unopened passage rings looks to be incorrect. The Sephiroth have all undergone an emergency shutdown process making them impossible to operate through conventional means."
"And let me guess, it means that they're going to fall?" Asch added with one eyebrow raised.

"While that is true, it's not due to the shutdown process. All it means is that even though Commandant Grants hasn't closed off the passage ring, we will have to continue to operate them as we have been, through force."

"Ummm," Luke hesitated for a moment. "Could someone explain that to me in English, please?"

"Yeah for the rest of us too please," Anise piped in. "Maybe boy genius over there can follow your musings Colonel, but the rest of us don't have a clue what you just said."

"Think of it like a security system," Asch explained. "Van's been messing around with the normal function of the passage rings, and Luke's been operating them through sheer force. The system recognizes the anomalies, and probably sees Luke as some kind of intruder. They've shut down the passage rings in an attempt to stop people from messing around with the Sephiroth and causing further damage."

"So the red rings show which Sephiroth have shut down?" Luke asked.

"That's right," his brother confirmed.

"So you're saying we can't operate the Sephiroth anymore?" Guy asked.

"No," Jade butt in. "It means Luke must continue to use his hyperresonance just as he has previously. Now, Luke, if you will."

"What am I doing?" Luke asked. Asch watched his little brother take the same spot he usually did, and was nervous. Luke was still exhausted from the stunt they'd pulled earlier and Asch worried he wouldn't have it in him to properly control the hyperresonance, especially with the precision he would need to. Luke couldn't screw this up, not only because it was dangerous and Score knew what would happen, but because it was one of the few areas where Luke was really tarting to become confident in his own abilities.

"While we're here, I'd like you to connect this Sephiroth to the Absorption Gate like you did with the one in the Meggiora Highlands," Jade provided. "We'll need to lower the lands all at once so we'll set this one to lower when we give the trigger at the Absorption Gate."

"How..." Luke puzzled at the ceiling.

"Don't concern yourself," the Colonel intervened. "I'll give you the exact commands to carve."

"Can't this be done at the Absorption Gate?" Asch asked.

"Yes, but I'd like to get it done now," Jade replied.

Asch scowled and stared the man down. What difference did it make if it was done now or later? Jade knew Luke was exhausted, the Colonel could pretend to be a lot of things, but dense was definitely not one of them.

'It's okay,' Luke said privately. 'I can handle this.'

'Are you sure?'

'I am. I wouldn't risk it if I wasn't.'

Asch sighed but dropped the issue. He had to trust that Luke knew his limits. Everything seemed to
be going smoothly enough. Luke's hyperresonance was as precise as it always was, and Jade was specific enough with his instructions that the younger sibling wasn't having any great difficulty. Asch had to hand it to Luke for putting up such a good front. He didn't look nearly as bad as their connection told him he was.

"Done," Luke let out a breath. "Tear, you're good to- Tear!"

The young melodist swayed back and forth and Luke rushed to her side just in time to catch her. This was beginning to become a rather unsettling routine. In front of them the pedestal slammed shut and the glyph on the ceiling vanished. The young noble very carefully lowered her to the ground and laid her in his lap. She felt so light and frail... and she was so limp. Just what was going on?

"Is she alright?" Natalia leaned over Luke's shoulder.

"I don't think so," Luke answered solemnly. "She might be making light of it, but something's really wrong."

A fit of coughing put a halt to any further discussion. The melodist opened her eyes, and opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by more coughing, more violently this time. Tear was quickly forced to sit up and Luke braced her shoulders as she shook violently.

"Tear, are you alright?" Natalia finally asked.

"I'm... I'm fine," Tear managed.

"You're not fine Tear," Luke argued.

"No really, I'll be okay. I'm just tired and caught a cold from all the snow. It's nothing."

"No, no it's not nothing." Luke stood his ground. Tear was still shaking, but broke free of his grasp and pulled herself to her feet.

"Luke's right Tear," Asch agreed. "You're not fooling anyone; people don't just pass out and start coughing up blood because they're tired." Tear clutched her fist, trying to hide the red stains on her white gloves. "When we get back to Sheridan you're going to see a doctor."

"I'll be fine." Tear argued, but the weakness in her voice undermined her argument.

"Well seeing as there's little we can do for her here, let's be going," Jade spoke up. "I'd like to make as much progress as we can before nightfall."

"Jade!" Luke protested. "Tear's still sick! She can barely walk much less trudge through tunnels and snow looking for a way out. Let's just take a break for a bit before rushing off again."

"We don't have time for that."

"And since when do we not have the time?" Asch's voice came across more than just angry. "Tell me old man, since when is an extra hour of travelling time worth more than our friend's health?! I don't know what's gotten into you lately, but I'm sick of it. Go back to Keterburg if you're that anxious to go! We'll meet you there."

"Asch is right Jade, taking a break here isn't going to make or break us, and Tear isn't the only one who's tired," Guy pointed out noticing just how wiped Luke and Asch seemed, not to mention Ion was still a touch unsteady on his feet. Ion had been using Daathic Fonic artes again and the two
boys had practically taken out Sync on their own; no one was going to fault them for being tired. And what a stunt that had been! Guy was impressed. When had they picked up a trick like that?

Jade let out a frustrated sigh, but it was perfectly clear from the looks of the others that this wasn't a battle he was going to win. But a half hour was all they were going to get.

If they thought the air had been frigid on their ascent, it was downright freezing once the sun began to set, and without anything to distract them this time, it seemed so much worse. The sun… Luke had never been quite so thankful to see the sun before. They were all getting worried when exploring the other tunnels wasn't producing any exits, but they eventually found the cave-in that Sync had used to dodge the Daathic seal. As it turned out, the exit was much further up the mountain than they had expected, something that didn't have Jade in a particularly good mood. It was going to take them until late afternoon tomorrow before they made it back to Keterburg.

Everyone walked along in silence, no one quite sure what to say. Tear had been violently sick twice already and she didn't look like she was over the worst of it yet. Just what was the matter with her? And what did it have to do with the passage rings?

"Try not to worry too much," Ion said comforting. "I'm sure the doctor will be able to help her."

"I hope so," Luke agreed smiling at the Fon Master's perceptiveness. "Hey, Ion?"

"What is it Luke?"

"How come you never told me you were a replica too?"

Ion sighed and thought on the question a moment. "If I had, would you have treated me any differently?"


"Then it really doesn't matter now, does it?"

"I guess not."

"To be honest, I've learned a lot from you and from Asch."

"From me?" Luke asked.

"Yes, for a long time, I felt as if I was nothing more than a replacement for the original Fon Master. I believed that it didn't matter if anything happened to me, because I could just be replaced by another replica. I think that's part of the reason I was always so reckless when it came to engaging in dangerous situations. I didn't value my life at all."

"But that's-"

"But after watching you and the way you live, I've come to realize that's not true at all. I may be Ion's replacement, but there are no replacements for me. I'm more than just the original Ion's shadow. I can be myself with my own hopes and dreams for this world."

"You learnt all that from me?"

"You don't give yourself enough credit," Ion answered. "I only hope that Sync can come to
understand that someday."

"He will," Luke smiled. "I'm sure you can get through to him, just give it time."

"Only if you'll help me."

"You know…" Luke suddenly realized, "I've never had a friend who's also a replica before. Well, I guess I did and I just didn't know it."

Ion chuckled, "the same goes for me."

"Then let's stay friends, no matter what happens."

"Thank you, Luke."

"What for?"

"For everything."
The fire crackled in the fireplace as Nephry sorted through the last stack of papers. A sigh escaped her lips when a glance out the window told her just how late it had become. Had it only been yesterday that her brother's friends had stopped in to see her? Nephry couldn't help but wonder if they'd been successful in locating her wayward sibling, and if they'd remember her request that they stop by to see her before leaving. It had been so long since she'd seen him, and with all the nasty rumours tied to Akzeriuth, she just had to see with her own eyes that he was really okay.

The office door opened a crack, distracting Nephry from her thought. Who was…? "Tanya? Is that you?"

"Your maid's gone home for the day I'm afraid," a deeper voice replied as he walked in the door, followed by several armoured men.

"I don't recall inviting you," Nephry stated curtly.

"Don't be like that; I'm not here to cause you any trouble. Well, not too much anyways."

"Then what drags someone like you all the way up here?"

"I just heard you had some rather special guests here in town." The voice suggested slyly.

"Well they aren't here anymore," Nephry answered.

"But they'll be back right? Your brother and his friends?"

"And if they will?"

"Don't get so defensive," the voice said with a chuckle. "I'm just going to shake things up a bit… and you're going to help me."

The midday sun was high overhead, giving the endless fields of snow a magical sparkle. The terrain was finally starting to flatten out as they were finally putting Mt. Roneal behind them; and frankly, Guy couldn't be happier. To say everyone was in rough shape was a huge understatement. Jade being in that oh so wonderful mood he'd been in lately had them up well before dawn and trekking down the unforgiving mountain. While they may make it back before dark, they were still dealing with the collateral damage.

Ion was sleeping on Tokunaga with Anise leading them through some of the deeper snow. Admittedly it was nice to have the oversized stuffed animal clearing the way through the off trail paths they were walking, but Guy would have felt better if Ion wasn't so run down. He wasn't the only one either. Tear had passed out awhile back, and was now resting on Luke's back. He'd have to have a word with that girl later. Didn't she realize it was okay to say something if she was tired? She didn't have to push herself beyond her limits for their sake. A break would be welcome, and not to be mean about it, but probably a lot more so then having to carry her as they pressed on.

Not that Luke really seemed to mind the melodist on his back. Asch had offered to take over for a bit, but Luke claimed he was just fine. Well, no one could say otherwise, especially with the way the conversation had turned.
"Awwww, come on," Luke whined. "I know we're running behind as it is, but everyone's really worn out. We're planning to spend the night in Keterburg anyway, why can't we go to the pool?"

"It's not a pool Luke, it's a spa," Guy said with a sigh. Yeah, if Luke was good to whine, he was still doing okay.

"But there's still a pool where you can go swimming, right?"

"Well… yes, but, we really don't have a whole lot of time to be messing around."

"But it's like Luke said," Anise protested. "We're staying the night anyways, it's not like it's going to set us back at all. Besides, neither Tear or Ion are back up to full speed yet, it would be a really good chance for them to relax and take it easy, you know!"

"You just want to go to a world class spa," Natalia noted sceptically.

"What? Me? No… of course not!" Anise laughed guiltily. "I just thought it would be a great place for Ion to rest!" Natalia hit the nail on the head.

"I'm going to have to agree with Guy on this one," Asch conceded. "While it might be a good place to relax, a good night's sleep will do them just as much good."

Natalia sighed and rolled her eyes. Asch clearly had no idea… honestly; did he really think a good night's sleep was preferred over an evening at the spa? Especially one so well known as Keterburg's? "I have to agree with Luke, I think a night at the spa would do wonders." Natalia piped up. "Besides, things will likely be getting hectic very soon; we should take the chance to relax while we can. Seeing as I doubt Ion and Tear have any protests I believe that makes you two outnumbered," the Princess finished with a sly grin.

"All right!" Luke cheered.

"Not so fast you three," Guy argued. "Even if you win this one, no one here has bathing suits. How do you plan on going to the spa?"

"Oh dear, that's right," Natalia suddenly realized. "I didn't think it would be necessary so I never bothered to pack one."

"Neither did I…" Luke trailed off.

"It wouldn't matter either way," Jade spoke up. "You need passes to access Keterburg's spa and those aren't easy to acquire. Only the highest ranking Malkuth nobility have them."

"Wow!" Anise's eyes lit up. "Such an exclusive spa! Now I really wanna go! Who knows how many bachelors are sitting up there just waiting to meet me!"

"But it's like Jade said," Guy continued, grateful to have found the kink in their plan. A spa would have women… lots of women, women that were difficult to avoid and he'd rather not deal with that. "If we had bathing suits and passes we would go, but we don't."


'I know a good remedy for pouting,' Asch said, the tone in his voice making it clear he was displeased with Luke's attitude. Luke took a wide step to the side and put himself out of Asch's range of motion. Those kinds of remedies almost always involved pain.
'Come on, you can't tell me you don't really want to go.'

Asch sighed. He couldn't deny he wouldn't mind seeing what all the fuss was about. He'd heard plenty of rumours about the facilities at Keterburg's hotel, and just how impressive they were supposed to be. While he appreciated Luke's desire to try and have fun while they still had the chance, there was a limit to everything. Jade might not be so out of line with his displeasure. They really couldn't afford to be fooling around. Who were they to toy with the lives of every creature in Auldrant?

'I don't,' Asch lied. 'I've better things to do, like saving the world.'

'You're such a bad liar,' Luke taunted. 'Don't you still owe Jade one for putting you on watch duty and not letting you sleep for a week?'

'And what does that have to do with going to the spa?'

'You have no imagination! You can't tell me you can't think of anything!'

Asch fought the mischievous grin that tugged at his lips. 'It doesn't matter either way; we don't have bathing suits and we don't have passes. We're not going.'

'Yeah, I know. But only because we don't have the passes and the bathing suits.'

Asch rolled his eyes. Luke just couldn't relinquish a victory. 'Yes, only because of that.' The redhead decided it would just be easier to indulge Luke this time around.

'Hey, if we ever get some, can we go?'

Asch would have shoved Luke in the snow if didn't still have the melodist on his back. Didn't Luke know when to just drop it? 'Yes Luke, if we ever manage to get some passes, we can go.'

'Promise?'

'Only if you stop harassing me about it.'

'Deal.'

'Then it's a promise.'

The soft rhythmic motion was soothing, like the gentle waves of a calm ocean. It was warm too, so much warmer than it had been. Then what had been, she wondered? But it seemed so utterly inconsequential. So she remained motionless. Voices, there was the sound of voices all around her. Why were there so many? Their noise drew her away, away from the calm, the serenity she had found. Why? Why couldn't she stay?

And yet, an inkling at the back of her mind wouldn't let her rest. There was a reason for the voice, a reason she couldn't remain. There was something she still had to do...someone she hadn't dealt with properly. Until then, there would be no repose for the songstress.

"Tear?" The melodist's eyes slowly opened, and the blurry image of Luke's worried smile came into focus. What was he so concerned about?

Suddenly, where the melodist was, her surroundings, the time of day, all of it hit her at once and
Luke fought to hold his grip and keep them both from taking a tumble into the snow. "Luke! What's going on? Put me down."

"Easy there Tear," Guys calming voice came from behind the melodist. "We don't need you passing out on us again. Just let Luke carry you. We're almost in Keterburg anyways."

"But-" Tear tried to protest, her cheeks reddening by the second.

"He's carried you all afternoon," Asch pointed out. "Another ten minutes isn't going to make much of a difference."

"Wait… all afternoon? What happened?" Tear inquired, relaxing a bit and giving in to the fact that for whatever reason, she was stuck on Luke's back until they got back to town.

"You were pushing yourself too hard and you passed out," Luke explained. "Please don't do that again, you had us all really worried."


"It's shameful for a soldier-"

"Life isn't a battlefield Tear," Asch cut her off. "You don't always have to play the soldier. That's no way to live."

Tear opened her mouth to respond but couldn't come up with anything. Instead she laid her head down on Luke's shoulder and listened to everyone talking. Behind her, Asch and Guy were talking about fon machines, maybe something to do with the Albiore. It was surprising to hear them have such a friendly conversation. Then again, there really hadn't been any animosity between them since they'd gotten the whole mess with Major Cantabile cleaned up. Major Cantabile… Tear wondered how her former instructor was faring. Judging by the degree of the injuries she'd received in their last encounter, she was probably on the mend. The melodist wondered how long it would be before she had to deal with that again.

Then there was Anise and Natalia ahead and to the left. They were chatting about Ion, about how he was a replica and something to do with Arietta. That's right… Fon Master Ion was also a replica. That didn't bother her as much as she thought it would. It was starting to seem like all her friends had some sort of tie to fomicry. Maybe it was true that fomicry had caused her a lot of pain, that it was still taking her brother from her… but Suzanne's words still rang clearly in her mind.

*Perhaps your own happiness isn't the only one being sacrificed for that hatred of yours.*

How often had she hurt them, said things about replicas and fomicry that put pain in their eyes? And for what? Her own self-satisfaction, and desire to lash out at something. It was so much easier to blame fomicry itself than to accept the fact that Van had chosen his genocide over her. Fomicry wasn't evil, it was a tool. Just like a sword or one of her songs, it was the person behind them that made the choice.

But it had taken Luke's tears for her to finally see it.

"Do you want to get down?" Luke asked softly. "I know the others were bugging you earlier, but you can walk if you want to."

"It's alright," Tear wrapped her arms across his chest. "If you'd carry me just a little further…" The melodist closed her eyes; she could hear the sound of his heart. It was beating so fast. Though she supposed it wasn't much of a surprise; he'd been carrying her all day. The sound of it was soothing,
and yet it saddened her. It was that same kind heart she’d attacked, that gentle soul of his she couldn’t see because of a silly seven letter word. Luke was more than just a replica, he was her most treasured friend… and someday she’d work up the courage to say the words that lay in her own heart.

Luke… I’m sorry.

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"Tear? Tear, you alright?" Guy's voice pierced her thoughts.

"Hm?" The melodist opened her eyes again. "What is it?"

"It's good to see you're well," Ion commented from beside her. The melodist's eyes travelled from Ion, back up to the blond then to the area around them. They were in the middle of Keterburg! What-

"You dozed off on us again," Guy said with a bit of a chuckle. "Are you going to be okay to walk?"

"I'll be fine!" Tear nearly jumped off of Luke's back. In the wilderness was one thing, but in the middle of a crowded street was another! Tear felt her cheeks flush when everyone laughed at her. It seemed like the journey up the stairs and into the hotel took forever with the melodist staring at her own feet. She could tell everyone was watching her. What were they so worried about? She wasn't going to drop dead in the middle of the lobby. She'd had plenty of rest, and in all honesty, she felt a great deal more energetic than she had since operating the passage rings.

Luke stole a glance at Tear from the corner of his eye. She seemed okay. He had gotten worried when she fell asleep again, but it didn't look like she was still feeling under the weather. Most of her colour had come back by this point, and to a random onlooker, you wouldn't know she'd been sick at all. But this was Tear; she was far too good at hiding her own pain for him to stop worrying just yet.

"Excuse me?" The receptionist snatched Luke away from his train of thought. "Would you be Master Luke and company?"

"Yes…" Luke answered, an eyebrow raised.

"The Governor left a package here that's addressed to you."

"Nephry did?"

"That's correct; she dropped it off this morning asking that I pass it on to you as soon as you were in."

"I wonder what it is," Luke mused as he shook the package. It was a decent sized box, about the width of Luke's chest and extending from his waist to his shoulders. Luke shook it; something inside moved, but didn't make very much noise.

"Well," Natalia spoke up after a moment. Watching Luke open presents during the winter holidays was bad enough; she didn't want to have to sit through it more than once a year. "Shall we open it?"


"Hey you're right!" Luke took a look at the top of the box. "It's not even addressed from Nephry."
"Well then who is it from?" Asch asked. Luke stared at the scratchings a bit longer.

"I can't tell, it's too messy," he replied with a defeated sigh.

"Well we're never going to find out if you don't open it," Anise pitched in eagerly. She was just as curious as the seven-year old to find out what was inside.

"You know," Guy whispered to Asch as Luke tore into the package. "I can't help but wonder why it's addressed to Luke. You'd think if it was supposed to be from Nephry, they'd address it to Jade."

"That's what worries me too," Asch confessed.

"Come on Luke!" Anise was practically bouncing. "What is it?"


"Well, if you've come this far, you had may as well open it," Tear suggested, her own curiosity getting the better of her. Everyone stood silently as Luke pulled out a note and a second stack of papers. A huge grin spread across his face as his eyes lit up with delight.

"Well Luke?" Natalia tried peaking over his shoulder.

The redhead held up the second stack of papers. "It's a present from Peony! They're passes to the spa here!"

"You have got to be kidding me!" Asch's palm hit his forehead. Since when were Luke and Peony in cahoots with each other?

"It's really a shame," Guy shrugged. "He went through the effort of getting us passes but none of us have any bathing suits." Luke's ensuing laugh was nothing short of sinister as he picked up one of the smaller boxes and gave it a good shake. Seven years of practice wasn't for nothing, definitely some kind of clothing.

"His Majesty always did have a poor sense of humour," Jade said with a defeated sigh. "I'm afraid it looks like Luke wins this time."

"Is there really one in there for everyone?" Natalia leaned over the box.

"Yeah!" Luke answered with the enthusiasm of a five year old about to get ice cream. "He even remembered to send one for Guy!"

"That's right," Asch realized. "You haven't had the pleasure of meeting Peony yet have you?"

"No," Guy laughed nervously, taking the box Luke offered. He stared at the plain cardboard and the pass that had been shoved into his hands. As he followed the others towards the lift that would take them to the changing rooms and the spa, he could only hope fate would be kind enough to spare him. But given fate's temperament lately, he had a sinking feeling it would be a very long night.

Luke broke the surface of the water, taking a deep breath as his red hair clung to his back for a moment before he let himself sink back into the pool. Treading water for a moment, he pulled the dripping red strands from his face then swam over to the edge and pulled himself up. What an amazing place this was!
Forget how long it had been since he'd gone swimming, Keterburg's spa was incredible. The water in the swimming pool was just perfect too. Behind him, there was a hot tub, definitely an appealing way to thaw out frozen limbs. Spending the night in a weather sheltered cave on a frozen mountain was not the most pleasant of experiences and Luke couldn't even begin to express how glad he was that they'd made it here.

Everyone was getting annoyed with his fooling around; even Luke could tell that it was starting to be too much. But what Natalia had said was right, everything was about to get hectic again. Somehow in this northern city, Luke felt separated from the rest of the world. He hadn't forgotten it, far from it; Akzeriuth's weight still sat heavily on his shoulders. But he knew now that letting that weight smother him wouldn't solve a thing. No matter what happened, he couldn't just forget to live, otherwise... if anything were to happen... he'd never stop regretting it; he couldn't honestly say that he was making the sacrifice of all those people worth it. The others may bug him about being a child and scold him for not taking things seriously, but Luke could see it in their eyes even if no one would say it. They all treasured the times they had together, and there was a light there when they could just stop worrying about everything. Even if just for a moment.

"Hey Luke, that was fast," Asch commented. Luke leaned back to see his older brother standing over him, and not surprisingly, wearing a set of swim trunks that was a mirror image of his own. Peony didn't have any more imagination than anyone else did. "How did you make out?" Asch asked a mischievous grin spread across his face.

"You see that little white blob right about there?"

Asch looked at where his sibling was pointing and finally managed to spot a patch of white sitting against the floor of the pool's deep end. "Nice, how'd you pull that off?"

"I tied it to the drain." Asch nearly choked in attempts to suppress the fit of laughter that was just daring to erupt. "How about you?" Luke asked.

"You see that window over there that overlooks all of Keterburg?" Asch asked. Luke did burst out laughing before giving Asch a high five. Now all they had to do was wait.

"So where are the others?" Luke asked.

"Well Guy was still changing when I left. Ion said he had something to inquire about at the reception desk and I think I saw Tear going with him. As for the girls, I have no idea. And Jade... well we'll see when or even if the old man shows up."

"He will," Luke chuckled.

"He won't have much choice now will he?"

"Who won't have much choice?"

"Oh hey Anise!" Luke greeted the dark haired girl. "Nice bathing suit."

"You think so?" Anise took another look at the getup she was wearing. The long orange sarong fell down to her ankles and was complemented by a matching top that tied around her neck. "It's a bit flashy if you ask me, but I guess it does accentuate my curves. You interested?"

"Not really. There isn't all that much to emphasize," Luke pointed out.

"Hey!" Anise protested.
"Well… I mean... it's just…" Luke stuttered. Man if he hadn't put his foot in his mouth there.

"It's okay," Anise sighed in mock disappointment. "I'm talking to the guy who's into Tear. After her anyone would look flat."

Asch laughed; Luke's face suddenly matched his hair.

"Hey Natalia!" Anise yelled over towards the changing area. "Are you coming out some time tonight?"

"No!" Natalia's voice called back.

"Come on!" Anise shouted. "It's not that bad!"

"Yes it is! It's embarrassing!"

"Awww, come on Natalia," Luke added not quite as loudly as Anise. "It can't be worse than Jade's!"

"You saw the Colonel's?" Anise's eyes lit up.

"I might have snuck a peek before I gave it to him," Luke answered mischievously.

"Promise you won't laugh!" Natalia's voice called back, saving Luke from the over eager thirteen year old.

"Promise!"

Natalia stepped out from behind the wall. Both her arms were crossed protectively across her chest and her cheeks were as red as the bathing suit made her fiancée's. There was definitely no doubt it had come from Peony. A very small bikini bottom was barely covered by a second transparent fabric that wrapped around her waist, and wasn't much longer. The top looked more like a strip of fabric tied around her chest and she had a matching ribbon in her hair.

'What in the hell does Peony think he's doing?!' Asch practically screamed in outrage.

'Well she had the body for it,' Luke commented.

Asch smashed him upside the head.

'Oww!' Luke protested, sending Asch a dirty look. He got a nastier one in return.

"It's flattering," Luke said aloud with a smile in the Princess' direction. "Don't be so embarrassed. Just...you know... be careful it doesn't untie."


'You're a moron, you know that?' Luke shot at his sibling.

'Shut up.'

"Hey guys!" Guy joined the group. "Wow… Natalia… don't you think that's a bit daring?"
"Believe me, I know," Natalia answered.

"Well Peony seems like an interesting guy," Guy laughed nervously. His own bathing suit was rather plain, just a regular set of shorts. He noticed that everyone else had picked up on this fact too.

"Looks like Peony didn't know enough to customize yours," Asch noted.

"Lucky," Natalia mumbled.

"Hello everyone," Ion said hesitantly. "I'm not interrupting anything am I?"

"No not at all, Fon Master," Asch answered.

"Sorry we're so late, the Fon Master wanted to get a floatation device so he could go in the pool," Tear explained.

"I'm afraid I've never had the opportunity to learn how to swim," Ion admitted sheepishly, gripping the large inflatable ring he'd picked up.

"Peony certainly picked an interesting bathing suit for you, didn't he?" Tear commented on the Princess' swimwear.

"Yes, I'm sure he thought he was being very funny. Though I must say he was quite conservative for yours," Natalia nodded at the bathing suit Tear wore.

"Oh he wasn't. Mine was just... too daring. This one is a rental."

"I don't think you need your knife though Tear," Luke pointed out as she noticed the red strap still on the melodist's leg. "We won't be attacked in the pool."

"It never hurts to be safe," Tear replied matter-of-factly. "It would be shameful for a soldier to be caught completely unarmed."

"Natalia...is something wrong?" Guy asked. Natalia's face has turned red all over again.

"Y-You mean there are rentals?!" Natalia exclaimed.

"That's right," Tear answered. "Over at the reception-" Before the melodist could even finish her sentence, Natalia had bee-lined for the change rooms.

'Awww, looks like you're out of luck Asch,' Luke taunted.

'I got more luck than you did,' Asch shot back. Luke's face flushed and he didn't reply.

"So where's Jade?" Ion inquired.

"He should be due to join us... any second now," the older redhead answered, making no attempts to hide the devilish smirk that had spread across his face.

"Asch, Luke, may I speak with you for a moment?" Right on cue, the voice came from the direction of the change rooms.

"Sure thing old man," Asch called back. "Come over and join us."

"I'd rather have this conversation in a more private setting."
"Whatever you have to say, you can say over here."

They heard a frustrated sigh as Jade contemplated his situation. He would let them have their way for now, but it wouldn't be without repercussions... even if it involved some patience on his part. He could wait as long as was necessary.

Jade stepped out into the spa and as he did several minds simply shut off at the sight. Anise burst into a fit of laughter with Asch and Luke not far behind her, Guy chose the safe route and got out of the line of fire and Tear decided that wouldn't be such a bad idea after all.

Oh they were dead. Luke knew that look in Jade's eyes and they were both dead... but it was so worth it! His bathing suit was skin tight too! The things you don't notice just from glancing at it in a box. Asch was in an equal level of hysterics and even Ion was trying his hardest not to laugh. First and foremost it looked like something Dist would wear. That alone was more than plenty, but it got so much better. Peony had obviously had it made out of his great-grandmother's curtains because the pattern consisted of a large number of pink flowers against a navy spandex material. There were large pink frills sewn down both sides and that lined the bottom about halfway between his waist and his knee.

"Where are they?" Jade asked calmly.

"Where's what?" Asch managed.

"Fess up," the Colonel demanded.

"To what?" Luke asked amidst a fit of laughter.

"Enough playing dumb with me, what did you do with my belongings and my bathrobe?"

"What makes you think we took them?" Asch demanded. "Why don't you look around," he suggested slyly. "I'm sure you'll find them."

Jade looked at both of them with one of the most dangerous looks either of them had seen him wear. "Need we have group discussions about secrets being kept?" Jade whispered threateningly into Asch's ear.

"We'll participate if you will," Asch shot back. An angry look swept over Jade's face. It was clear he'd never dealt with a situation like this before.

"Hey Luke," Anise whispered. "Is that thing at the bottom of the pool what I think it is?" A mischievous grin spread across Luke's face and Anise giggled even harder. "What do you say we get out of the line of fire?"

Luke looked up at his brother who was already engaged in a battle of wits with Jade, one that, for all he was trying to hide it, Jade was starting to enjoy. "Maybe that's not such a bad idea," Luke conceded. "This can't end well."

"No, no it won't," Anise agreed. "But seriously you two, next time let me in on this stuff sooner!"

"If Jade lets us live until a next time," Luke laughed.

"True enough."
Luke ran the towel through his hair one more time, doing his best to get the last of the water out. He knew he should have tied his hair up like Asch had, it was going to be a headache combing through it all later. But that was for later, Luke wrung out his bathing suit before tossing it back in the box it had come. He could leave it out to dry once they got back to their room, for now he just had to hurry. He'd been the last one out of the water because Jade had made him go get the bathrobe that was still tied to the bottom of the pool. He was no fun at all. It had taken a few tries to get it untied and out of the water.

Luke had spent most of his time in the pool. Eventually Natalia and Anise had dragged Tear off with them to enjoy some of the spa's finer amenities. Luke would have liked to tag along just to see what they were, but that kind of stuff was just too girly. Guy admitted he wanted a massage, but his plan was foiled when they found out all the masseurs were...well masseuses. So instead Luke began teaching Ion to swim, a feat all in itself as Luke discovered he really wasn't good at explaining how to swim.

"There you are, Luke," Guy stated as the redhead rounded the corner. A quick glance told Luke he was the last one.

"Sorry I'm late."

"What took you?" Luke held up the wet bathrobe as an explanation before tossing it along with his towel into the designated bin. "He made you go get it?" Guy asked with a chuckle. The full story of his and Asch's little joke had made it through the group and Luke had already received several recommendations that he sleep with one eye open tonight. Luke certainly wasn't inclined to disagree.

"Well then," Jade spoke up garnishing everyone's attention. "If we've had enough fun for-"

"Excuse me," one of the hotel workers interrupted the Colonel mid-sentence. It was an older man, dressed quite finely and bearing a silver-looking platter that had several envelopes on it. "Would you be Master Jade and company?"

"Since when are we your cronies?" Asch whispered to the Colonel.

"You *were* the ones who came running here looking for *me,*" Jade slyly pointed out.

"What is it now?" Guy inquired with an exasperated sigh. There had been far too many noble girls in that place, and the close encounters he'd had still sent chills up his spine. Anise's rescue method from the flirts hadn't been any less taxing. Only the former Fon Master Guardian could have the normally adept swimmer practically drowned in four feet of water.

Jade turned back to the hotel worker and nodded to indicate the man had his attention.

"Your presence has been requested in the ballroom in one hour."

"By whom? And for what purpose?"

"I'm afraid I wasn't given any details, I was only given these invitations and asked to escort you to your respective rooms," the man replied meekly.

"And what rooms might those be?" Jade inquired. "We've already booked a set of rooms for ourselves, and we're more than capable of returning to them when we so choose."

"I'm sorry sir, I was only given instructions." The man offered Jade the envelopes on his platter, and quickly slipped away before his inquisition continued.
"So much for our escort," Asch commented.

"No matter, the rooms are on each invitation," Jade noted. Below the three digit number that told them their next destination, was an invitation written out finely in what Jade recognized as his sister's handwriting. It was suspicious, for the words, he knew were most definitely not hers.

You are to attend a private meeting in the ballroom that will take place just after supper. Your attendance is not optional as we'll be chatting about some very important matters. Should you not choose to come, well we'll have to deal with that should the event arise. But I'm sure you're much smarter than that now, aren't you?

PS. This event is formal. You will find what you need in your designated rooms. Do not be late.

"A meeting in the ballroom?" Luke puzzled over the invitation.

"Sounds more like a trap to me," Asch commented.

"But why the dressing up?" Guy inquired.

"At the very least it would disarm the girls," Jade pondered. "While most formal wear for men allow for the carrying of at least a sword, if this person has chosen it for us, there's no guarantee of that either."

"You guys are over thinking this," Luke protested. "What if it's really just a meeting?"

"What about this letter doesn't seem suspicious to you?" Anise asked sceptically.

"How about the fact that it has Peony written all over it?" Natalia provided. "This certainly seems like the sort of prank he'd pull. Especially after going through the trouble of arranging the spa, I wouldn't put it past him to continue the joke."

"I agree with Natalia," Ion spoke up. "It doesn't seem like the sort of thing Van or any of the God-Generals would set up. Why don't we at least check it out? Nothing says we can't leave if things seem suspicious."

"Well I guess we don't have anything better to do." Guy shrugged.

"Yeah, but even if this is a big joke of Peony's, who's going to be meeting us?" Anise asked.

"Well," Asch replied. "There's only one way to find out."

Natalia took a deep breath and looked back down at her invitation and the three numbers at the top of the page. Looking up, the same numbers decorated the wooden door in a stylized golden numbering. The Princess' supper roiled in her stomach; she really didn't want to do this. A dress… from Peony of all people, it was a disaster just waiting to happen; and this time there weren't any alternatives.

Never did Natalia think there would come a time she'd regret not packing something nice to wear. Most anything that could be worn on occasions was completely impractical for travelling in, so never once had she bothered. Oh what she wouldn't give for her wardrobe full of gowns right now. But wishing wasn't going to get any of her dresses halfway across Auldrant but it would certainly make her late. With a burst of determination, Natalia turned the knob, slipped in the door and shut
it behind her.

The dress was hanging from the canopy bed, its black fabric contrasting against the soft blue sheets. Natalia was… impressed, definitely not what she had been thinking. She was expecting something with a little more skin and little less class, but the gown he’d provided was exquisite. The black fabric was broken by a white train that stemmed from the back and draped down the length of the dress. The soft satin flowed beautifully under her fingers, and a burst of delight rose in the Princess. A small note was sitting on the bed.

*To make up for earlier. Have fun tonight.*

Unsigned, though Natalia was sure of who it was from. Peony certainly knew how to be a gentleman when he tried. What spiked her curiosity even further, was the reason behind tonight’s events. Why was Peony going through so much effort to set everything up in Keterburg for them? What purpose did it serve him?

Regardless of his reasons, Natalia was deeply grateful for his actions. After all that had happened, after all the mistakes she had made, and with the world at stake, tensions among them were running unusually high. His intervention couldn't have come at a better time, and somehow, Natalia felt he knew that. Being a world leader he would certainly have an idea of everything that had been going on.

So for whatever purpose Peony had in mind, she, at the very least, would indulge him a little.

The knock was soft at first, so much so that Luke thought it was his imagination. But as he finished tightening the last belt, the knock came again. Who? Shouldn't everyone be busy getting ready? If the others had half the belts his outfit did, they should sill be getting dressed.

"Come in, it's open," Luke called as he strapped his sword to his side.

"I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"


"Thank you." Natalia blushed a bit. "You look rather dashing as well. Really, you ought to dress up more at home."

Luke laughed weakly. "This isn't really my thing. It's not bad, but I couldn't imagine having to wear something like this everyday."

"Fair enough," Natalia conceded. "Do you need someone to help brush your hair?"

"You don't have to-"

"I don't mind at all," Natalia cut Luke off. "I'd really like to, if you'll let me."

"Sure," Luke shrugged. "There's a brush in my bag on the bed. I should warn you, it's probably a mess after the pool."

"All the more reason to have someone who can see what they're doing," Natalia argued.

"So what did you come here for?"
"What? You don't think I came just to comb your hair out properly?" Natalia teased.

"Sorry."

"No you're right. I guess I was just a bit nervous, that's all. It's the first time I've been to a party without some kind of escort."

"Wow, you and Asch really do go way back, don't you?"

"Every since we were children," Natalia replied softly, running her fingers through Luke's hair as she combed it out. "Probably since before we were even born… or I guess, before I was ever adopted."

"Natalia, did you ever meet your birth parents? Like did Van tell you who they were or anything when he told you you were adopted?"

"No, why do you ask?"

"Well I was thinking about it the other day," Luke explained. "I was trying to figure out how Master Van could have found out your secret. Didn't your Nana say only a couple of people knew?"

"That's true I suppose," Natalia contemplated as she moved around the side of Luke's head. The redhead was doing an amazing job of keeping still, even though she knew she didn't have the gentlest hands when it came to these things. "I guess I never really gave it much thought. So much was going on around then…"

"You don't suppose it's one of the God-Generals, do you?" Luke asked with a laugh.

Natalia was silent. The possibility was there…

"I was kidding, Natalia. Besides, Legretta really doesn't seem like the mother type."

"Why Legretta?" Natalia asked in outrage.

"Well she looks the most like you, and really if you think about it, she's the only choice. Sync, Arietta and Cantabile are all way too young. Wait- You don't think it's Dist do you?"

"You're not being funny!" Natalia smacked Luke in the head with the brush while the young noble reduced himself to stitches at the thought of Dist as a parent.

"He'd probably lose it in one of those machines of his!" Luke was still laughing. Natalia began to laugh in spite of herself.

The thought of Dist tearing apart a machine looking for a baby, or even doing anything remotely related to caring for a child was amusing to say the least. "Now seriously," Natalia managed through her giggling. "Hold still so I can finish."

Silence settled over the room again.

"I think you should try and make up with Asch," Luke suggested, returning to the underlying issue.

"Why- why do you say that all of a sudden?"

"Things aren't going to get easier later. We all know it; you feel it too don't you? This is it, we're getting down to the end, and Master Van isn't going to just sit back and watch. Now's the time to tell him how you feel before things get stressful again, and before something happens. Live so
you'll have no regrets."

"For a seven year old, you say some pretty mature things," Natalia replied.


"It's easy enough to say such things but... I don't even know where to start."

"Ask him to dance."

"And if he refuses?"

"Then you come get me and we'll tag team him."

Natalia couldn't help but giggle at the thought of her and Luke wrestling Asch on to the dance floor. How was it Luke could so easily appease her concerns? All the butterflies in her stomach were gone.

"There, finished," Natalia declared, quickly running the brush through Luke's hair one last time. "You're still not presentable, but it's as good as you're going to get."


"Hey Luke!" Anise's voice came from the other side of the door. "Come on, you're going to be late! Who's in there with you?"

"Natalia," Luke answered. "And we're coming, just give us a minute!"

"Oh I get it," Anise said in a sing-song tone. "Well you two love birds take all the time you need. Natalia, be sure Asch isn't late now! I still have to go get Luke!"


"No, we're not," Luke pre-empted the question. "It's probably because we're alone in here together that Anise is assuming Asch and I switched. I'd like to be there when she goes to get Asch though."

"Really?" Natalia looked into the redhead's emerald eyes. They looked so much alike. It hurt her to know that she had no way of knowing for sure it was truly one of them or the other. Well... there was one way.


Luke held his hand over the cheek where Natalia had kissed him. He had never been kissed by a girl before. Granted Natalia was family and it didn't actually count any more than a kiss from his mother would, he was still flustered.

Luke took a deep breath and found himself staring out the window into the night. Snow was gently falling, glittering in the moonlight that had found a hole in the clouds. Everything seemed so quiet. The calm before the storm? If the first half of their night was any indication, it just might be. But it
was those kinds of storms Luke liked to throw himself into full force. There was nothing he loved more than spending time with the people he cared about.

'Hey Luke,' Asch's voice came across their connection, betraying a hint of confusion.

'What's up?'

'Why did Anise think I was you?'

Luke burst out laughing. Tonight would definitely be one to remember.

'That's a bit of a long story.'

Music was already playing when Asch opened the doors into the grand ballroom. Violins and cellos serenaded the eight people who stood, with varying levels of confusion on the marble floor. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling giving the room a soft glow. Outside the giant glass windows, snow gently fell under the room's watchful gaze and warming light. Around the boundaries of the dance floor, several tables were set up with a variety of drinks and food ranging from meats and vegetables to an assortment of snacks and cakes.

"So glad you decided to come," an all too familiar voice erupted from behind them.

"So it was you," Natalia smiled at the Malkuth monarch.

"Your Majesty," Jade said with as much politeness as he could muster through varying levels of frustration. Peony had always enjoyed dragging others into his affairs. He'd irresponsibly done so for as long as the Colonel could remember knowing him, and Jade had always done his best to tolerate it. Why he decided to put up with such behaviour had always been a bit of a mystery, even to Jade himself, but at the time it was something that seemed necessary to do. This time however, it was not. There were other places for all of them to be and responsibilities to tend to. Peony's decision to temporarily abandon the throne during war times may be his own, but he had no right to be putting their mission on the line for his foolish games. "What are you doing here?"

"Lighten up a bit Jade; you're going to put an awful damper on things at this rate," Peony patted Jade on the back. "How long has it been since of all us were together, much less here in Keterburg? I think it merits a bit of a celebration!"

"All of you?" Luke inquired curiously.

"That's right, this old bugger over here and I used to live up here back in the day. Keterburg wasn't the same by the time we were done with it!"

"I believe that was all Your Majesty's doing," Jade calmly pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose.

"Well whatever," Peony shrugged. "You're still enjoying being the kill-joy, I see."

"Man, you got that right," Anise muttered under her breath.

"While I'm not as opposed to having some fun," Asch commented. "I'm still a little in the dark here. Your so-called 'invitation' sounded like you had something urgent to say."

"Oh that. Sorry about the whole 'threatening letter' thing, but I knew Jade would never so much as
think of showing up if there wasn't at least something for him to confirm or figure out."

Asch smirked as Jade did his utmost to hide the frustrated sigh that escaped him. Peony had played him like the instruments that still lured sound into their midst. "You still haven't explained why you came," Asch pointed out.

"Oh, I have my reasons," Peony gave the redhead a wink. A knock came on the giant wooden doors, and if possible, Peony's grin grew even wider. The blond monarch made his way over to the door and opened it letting in a young woman.

Of course, Asch rolled his eyes. He should have expected as much from the flirt. Though he couldn't help but be curious as to who the woman Peony had invited was. It wasn't until Luke said something that he noticed.

"Nephry!" The younger redhead exclaimed in surprise. Nephry looked completely different than when they'd seen her a few days ago. The dress she wore was much more flattering than the suit she'd had on and if not for the colours that danced around the bottom, it would have been reminiscent of a wedding dress. Her golden brown hair was pulled back into a bun from which several curls flowed. A golden chain was hanging around her neck, and from the way she fingered it, Luke guessed it was probably a gift from the man who held her arm. "It's a surprise to see you here."

"I'm surprised to be here myself," Nephry confessed. "I didn't intend to come."

"Well I'm glad you did," Peony replied, wearing a victorious grin of sorts.

Jade was simply shaking his head. Peony in Keterburg, he should have known this would involve Nephry in some way. It certainly explained why he'd gone to such drastic lengths to arrange the evening. If anything, the rest of them were probably there to keep things from getting awkward between the two of them.

"We're not late, are we?" A head of silver hair ducked in the door followed by his sister.

"Ginji, Noelle!" Guy said in surprise. Both pilots were dressed up and looked amazing. Most of the time the two of them were covered in oil or engine grease, and yet, they both looked completely comfortable in their formal wear.

"Hi guys," Noelle called. "We ran into Emperor Peony in the port when he arrived so he invited us to come along."


"Hey there, Mieu. How were things on the Albiore while we were gone?"

"They were really good! I listened to Master and helped Ginji out all the time!" Luke met eyes with the pilot's who smiled nervously indicating things didn't go quite as smoothly as the cheagle indicated. Somehow, Luke figured that Mieu's 'assistance' was a large part of the problem.

"Well then, Nephry," Peony spoke up as the small orchestra changed songs. "May I have this dance?" Nephry took the monarch's hand and he pulled her out onto the dance floor. Ginji turned to his sister and made the same offer.

"Well," Anise shrugged with a bit too much cheer for attempting to sound disappointed. "Looks like we're stuck here all night; might as well make the most of it."
"Indeed," Jade replied. This was a horrendous waste of time, but unfortunately Anise was correct. Peony had trapped them there, and it was going to be a long term of imprisonment.

Tear stood on the edge of the dance floor watching the activity before her. Her blue and golden dress swayed as the various couple passed by with unusual grace. The music was soft and flowed beautifully among the dancers, putting her heart at ease. She had always loved music, but so seldom had she the chance to truly enjoy it.

"How are you feeling?" Guy took a place beside the melodist.

"Fine, much better than before," Tear admitted.

"Well then why aren't you dancing? Even Anise and Ion are making a go of it." The blond chuckled at the awkward pair trying to navigate their way around their more experienced counterparts.

"I could ask you the same thing."

"Y-You know why I can't dance!" Guy managed. Tear chuckled. Her gaze shifted across the room where Nephry and Jade were deep in conversation.

"I'm glad Nephry got the chance to talk with the Colonel."

"Yeah," Guy agreed. "She seemed pretty worried about him. You know, they seem like such unusual siblings."

"And yet they're surprisingly functional," Peony cut into their conversation.

"That doesn't surprise me either," Guy confessed. "It's hard to picture Jade as part of anything dysfunctional. Well, except lately," Guy muttered last part under his breath.

"Is he being a stick in the mud?" Peony asked.

"Well that's one way of putting it. He's always been the one to keep us organized, but lately it's just been ridiculous."

"He's just starting to feel the stress of everything that's all," Peony explained. "I don't think it's physically possible for Jade to stress out, so he just gets that way. He's never been one to do something halfway. As soon as he gets involved, everything becomes his responsibility."

"That might explain why he's been so uptight since we left him in Sheridan," Guy realized. "He's probably been worried about how all the projects are coming along. Not to mention the fate of the Outer Lands."

"Yeah, that sounds like our Jade." Peony grinned. "He's just the type that needs someone to force him to stop and take a breather every once and awhile."

"I guess that makes sense," Tear agreed as Nephry said something that made Jade smile. He resisted it every step of the way, but he was enjoying himself as much as the rest of them.

"Well then," Peony offered his hand to the melodist. "May I have this dance?"

"Thank you, but I'll have to decline."
"Come on now, you're far too beautiful to just be a wall flower."

Tear shook her head, her cheeks turning a pinkish hue.

"I'll take you up on that offer," Noelle stepped in. Tear sent her a grateful smile as the blonde led the monarch onto the dance floor.

"You can't dance, can you?" Guy guessed. Tear's face turned bright red, betraying the melodist's answer. Tear looked back out at the dancers. Across the floor, Asch and Natalia were dancing; the young couple were easily the most beautiful dancers she had ever seen. They seemed to effortlessly float across the floor with unparalleled grace.

"Don't compare yourself to them," Guy commented noticing the melodist's blue eyes following Asch and Natalia around. "They've been dancing together since they were old enough to walk."

"They're still amazing; I would never be able to dance like that."

"If you want, I can teach you," Luke's voice came from behind Tear. The melodist spun around to find the redhead smiling at her.

"I don't think I'd be able to-"

"How do you know you can't unless you try?" Guy protested.

"We don't have to go out on the floor," Luke added. "We can just practice off to the side. Come on, it'll be fun." Luke extended his hand.

"Okay…" Tear accepted his gesture. "But just for a little bit."

Luke led the melodist off to the side just as he had promised. As they walked along, Asch and Natalia danced by, putting another smile on Luke's face. He was so glad to see the two of them together again. Maybe not back to normal, but definitely a step in the right direction. Deep down, he knew Asch had missed Natalia as much, or perhaps even more so than the Princess did the same. They were both just too stubborn to realize it.

Tear took a deep breath trying to suppress the butterflies in her stomach. Luke gently took her hand and showed her how to stand. He was very patient with her and for all that she knew she was making a fool of herself, it was fun. Luke's smile reassured her and before she knew it they were slowly moving along.

"I didn't know you could dance," Tear commented, daring to take her eyes off her feet for a second to meet Luke's soft emerald eyes.

"I may only be seven, but I'm still a noble. It sort of comes with the territory."

Tear laughed. It was surprising to see just how skewed her perceptions had become. Here she had promised to get to know Luke, and yet she had spent the last month trying to fit him into her pathetic little prejudices about replicas. She hadn't learned a thing. Before her was a warm and surprisingly mature young man, and she didn't even know where he'd come from.

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"Wow, those two look like they're having fun," Anise commented watching Luke and Tear in the corner. It looked like they'd moved on from the waltz and Luke was trying to show her the fox trot. Tear didn't look like she was doing quite as well with the more complex footwork.
"Indeed," Jade commented. The Colonel's eyes moved from them, to Asch and Natalia still out on the floor. Nephry was dancing with Ginji and Ion was watching them while enjoying a glass of water across the room. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves for the time being.

"Hey Colonel," Anise piped up.

"Yes, what is it former Fon Master Guardian?"

Anise shot Jade a dirty look before turning away again. "Come dance this next dance with me."

"I don't have a secret stash of money like Guy does."

"Oh come on, that has nothing to do with it. I've been watching you all night, you haven't danced once. I only want one dance."

"I'm afraid I'll have to respectfully decline."

"Well, if you're not going to dance with me, at least dance with your sister or something. It would be a shame to waste the chance."

"Oh but once you get to be my age, dancing is so hard on your old bones," Jade placed a hand on his back in mock pain.

"Colonel… do you know how to dance?" Anise asked, a mischievous grin working it way onto her face. Jade coughed indignantly.

"Hey there you two," Peony sat down in a nearby chair. Noelle had snatched the Fon Master and the two of them were dancing across the room.

"Hey… Peony?" Anise sang in a nonchalant manner as she approached the blond monarch.

"Oh Anise," Jade interrupted. "I have a mission for you."

"Just a second, I have something I wanna ask Peony," Anise chirped with an evil gleam in her eyes.

"I'll give you 500 gald if you can get Guy to dance a full dance with you."

Anise's eyes lit up. "Oh Guy!" He sang tauntingly as she skipped off.

"Well that got rid of her pretty effectively," Peony slyly commented.

"Money usually does, I only wish the same tactic worked against you."

"Hey, that's pretty mean after I went through all this trouble."

"Your Majesty," Jade adjusted his glasses. "What are you doing here? Your country is currently at war; the state of affairs in the world is hardly stable. It is scarcely the time to be leaving the throne."

Peony sighed and a hint of laughter escaped his lips. "You never change, do you?"

"I don't see how that relates to the matter at hand," Jade answered sternly.

"It has everything to do with the matter at hand," Peony pointed out. "No matter how important someone seems, no matter how crucial their task is, everyone has to take to take a break every now and then. No one can run on full forever, a break helps clear the mind."
"Even so, what of the affairs in Grand Chokmah? I can't imagine you got the council members approval."

"I left a message. Besides, from what you've told me, there really isn't a war between Kimlasca and Malkuth. Neither of us plans to continue hostilities, we've just yet to formally make peace. The council members know what to do in the case of an emergency, it's not like I left when they needed me for anything other than day to day stuff."

"It doesn't change the fact that you're being irresponsible," Jade pointed out.

"Maybe, but if being responsible means driving these kids into the ground until they're past their breaking point, then I'll live with it."

Jade smiled in defeat. "You certainly are ruthless."

"Hey Your Majesty!" Luke called as he and Tear made their way over. Over by the windows, the musicians finished their final song, and soon everyone had gathered around.

"Thank you so much for everything!" The young redhead said enthusiastically, Tear's arm still around his own. "It must have been a lot of trouble to go through just for us!"

"See Jade, that's what we call some appreciation!" Peony said with a wide grin.

"Jade probably would have appreciated it a little more if he had a different bathing suit," Asch commented slyly.

"You got him to wear it?!" Peony nearly jumped out of his chair in excitement. Both redheads nodded simultaneously with matching grins. "Oh, I wish I could have been there to see it! I guess my imagination will just have to do."

"Your Majesty," Jade spoke up. "Please stop imagining me with less clothing on."

"Eww, Jade! You don't have to put it like that!" The monarch protested. Everyone laughed.

"Actually, Emperor Peony," Natalia began. "While you're here, there are a few matters between our countries that we'd like to discuss."

"See Jade," Peony elbowed the man on his right. "Who said I wasn't working?"

"I'm sorry," Natalia replied.

"No, it's alright. There's a fair few things to settle, aren't there?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"From our understanding, neither country wants war," Asch picked up. "On behalf of His Highness, King Ingobert, I'd like to propose a peace treaty between our two countries, to end such senseless war. At the same time, I think it would be a good idea to discuss anything necessary for when the lands will be lowered."

"A good idea," Peony agreed. "But you realize this can't happen here, right?"

"I do realize that," Asch acknowledged Peony's concerns. A true peace treaty would have to be conducted between both official rulers, and after being passed by their respective councils. "However, because of other responsibilities we can't help mediate the process."
"That's fine," Peony laughed. "Believe it or not, we were able to get things accomplished before you guys came along. Not that it seemed that way with the pointless hostilities all over the place, but it happened. I'll work on arranging it. Finding a mediator could be difficult though."

"How about my grandfather, Teodoro?" Tear suggested. "He's the mayor of Yulia City. Not only could he act as a mediator, but he could provide information about living the Qliphoth."

"That's a great idea Tear, but how is Teodoro going to mediate a meeting from Yulia City? He doesn't seem the type to be able to travel Yulia Road all that well," Anise pointed out.

"I can bring people where they need to go," Noelle offered. "You don't still need both Albiores do you?"

"No, that's a good idea," Asch agreed. "Looks like Ginji is stuck with us."

"What a terrible fate to have forced upon me," Ginji rolled his eyes.

"Actually…" Peony pondered. "Noelle, would you mind shuffling people the other way around? Yulia City might not be a bad place to hold the meeting, especially since Daath doesn't seem too stable at the moment."

"I do apologize for that," Ion bowed.

"You don't have to apologize Ion!" Anise protested. "It's not your fault the Commandant and Mohs are lunatics!"

"Well Ingobert will have to agree to it first. I can't make any promises on how all this will turn out," Peony reminded them. "But I'll do my best. I think we've all had just about enough of this war."

"Agreed," Asch nodded.

"I don't mind bringing you where you need to go," Noelle replied. "I'll have to head back to Sheridan for supplies but I'll head to Grand Chokmah as soon as I'm done."

"We'll be returning to Sheridan as well," Jade provided.

"Yeah, we should see how Iemon and the others are doing," Asch agreed.

"Thank you so much for your efforts," Natalia said with a bow.

"Oh don't worry about it," Peony said with a mischievous wink. "I'd do anything for you." His gaze landed a foot south of Natalia's face.

A dinner roll hit Peony in the back of the head.

'You do realize you may just have sparked international conflict, right?' Luke taunted.

'On what basis?'

'Harassment of enemy royalty with bread.'

Asch laughed. 'See if I care.'
"Oh come on, don't give me that crap. You've had three days to get ready. There's no excuse for being this far behind schedule!" The violet haired God-General's voice echoed in the empty chapel. The captain before her cringed at his superior's displeasure; Cantabile may be the most laid back and easiest of the God-Generals to work for, but her temperament, and more specifically her temper, were to be feared. "Now!" she continued. "You're going to have everything done so we can depart tomorrow or so help me Yulia I will knock you into next week."

"Ma'am!" The captain scurried off.

"How are things coming along, Cantabile?" Van asked, the woman's captain flying by him as if hell itself had just been loosed.

"They're worse than useless!" She protested. "Honestly, you'd never know they were my men!"
Van chuckled. It was common knowledge Cantabile's squad was the most lax of the six divisions.

"How about you?"

"I told you to stop worrying about me," Cantabile shot back. "I've been good as new for almost a week now. I'll be fine; you've got much more important things to worry about."

"How about the other divisions?"

"They're ready as far as I can tell, but you'd have to ask her." Cantabile purposefully added a touch of spite to the last word. "I still don't see why she has to come," Cantabile mumbled.

"It's not like you to be so foolish," Van commented.

"Hey!" Cantabile protested. "Who's being foolish?"

"Legretta's squad is suited to the task at hand, and is the only one currently able to assemble in time. Don't let your personal feelings get in the way."

"Yes, sir."

Van let out a heavy sigh. Asch and his band of fools were beginning to grow cumbersome. Their fooling around was tolerable at first but it had reached a point where enough was enough. He couldn't allow them to interfere any longer. This wasn't some game and the future was at stake.

He had tolerated such irrational behaviour long enough; it was beyond the time when he could just sit back and leave things to others. Now it was time for him to do something about it.
Sync sighed in frustration as he finished giving the last of his instructions. Not that a single word had penetrated the thick skulled captain that stood before him. That much was obvious by the dumbfounded look on his stupid face. The way the idiot was staring at him you'd think he had a third eye or something.

"What are you staring at?!!" Sync snapped scaring the captain out if his stupor.

"I-I'm sorry sir," the oracle knight stuttered. "It's just, without your mask, you really do bear resemblance to the Fon Master. Are the two of you related or something?"

"That's none of your concern!"

"Of course it isn't sir! Forgive my impudence! I'll get to work right away!" The man bolted from the room.

Sync turned around, leaning against his desk and cursing under his breath at the mass of stupidity he now had to deal with. His eyes landed on the golden mask that sat so innocently on the oak surface. The green haired God-General picked it up. What was the point?! Sync chucked the useless contraption across the room where it crashed into a shelf and sent several stacks of paper tumbling to the ground.

Rumours had already flown through Daath about Sync the Tempest and his supposed relation to the Fon Master. Curse that blasted Necromancer! He had obviously overestimated the man. Sync never thought he would do something as reckless as bring down the tunnels. He could have buried himself alive with that stunt. Of course with all the stupid luck that band of idiots had, no such thing happened, and Sync was cut off from the passage ring.

At the very least he had accomplished the mission Van had assigned him. He'd confirmed the shut down of the Sephiroth, and judging by the Sacred Flame's recent actions, they were setting everything up just beautifully. There was some small amount of satisfaction in letting the fools do the Commandant's work for him. But that satisfaction wasn't nearly worth dealing with all this crap. Daath was nothing but a nest festering with gossip and idiocy.

He would kill them all, every last one of them for humiliating him like that; for making him listen to all that good for nothing idealist crap they were spewing, and for having to deal with everyone staring at him like he'd grown a second head. They were going to pay. He was going to relish killing them all, up to and including that Score be damned Necromancer if it was the last thing he did.

White cotton clouds sailed by the Albiore at amazing speeds, making them little more than white blurs while Anise and the others patiently looked on. It was almost enough to make the former Fon Master Guardian sick. Just focus on the big ones in the distance… If Anise had learned to appreciate anything over the course of this journey, it was solid ground beneath her feet. Well, that and Peony's taste in swimwear.

"Colonel, you have that look in your eye," Anise commented, looking for some kind of distraction.

"And what look might that be?" Jade inquired. "Certainly not the air sick look in your eye."
"I hate you," Anise grumbled.

"I think we have established that," the devious Colonel pointed out.

"Oh just spill it, what do you want to say?" the raven haired girl shouted in frustration. Seriously, she couldn't believe she missed him being a stick in the mud.

"She's got a point there," Asch spoke up. "We're all here and you're just dying for a way to bring something up."

"Yes well, you certainly don't leave much for the creative to work with," Jade answered slyly.

"That's kind of the point," Asch shot back, a smirk on his own face.

"Well, all joking aside, I'd like to go over our plans regarding the stabilization of the core before we reach Sheridan. I'm certain Iemon and Tamara will feel the need to go over it again, but you know how they are."

"Point taken," Guy agreed. "We don't really have much room to mess this up."

"Correction, we have zero margin for error," Jade pointed out. "The slightest mistake could cost all of us our lives. And I'm sure you're aware of the consequences for the rest of the world should we fail."

"Then we'll just have to take our time and make sure everything is done properly," Tear stated.

"I'm afraid it isn't that simple," Jade intervened. "We'll be working on somewhat of a time limit. A fonic barrier will be equipped to the Tartarus to protect us from the miasma and the severe pressure that is exerted by the planet's interior. That barrier, however, is subject to a great deal of pressure and can only last a maximum of 130 hours after it's activation upon departure from Sheridan."

"But the journey from Sheridan to Akzeriuth in the Tartarus has to be at least five days." Guy pointed out.

"Precisely," Jade agreed. "That leaves us ten hours to breach the core and get out."

"That's not a lot of time," Ion commented.

"No, it isn't. We'll have to escape in the Albiore which will possess a similar pressure neutralizing device. The Albiore's barrier, however will only last about three hours, so it will have to ride in the Tartarus' hold for the journey to the core."

"So we leave the Tartarus in the core and it will neutralize the vibrations?" Luke asked.

"That's right," Asch confirmed. "And that should solidify the mantle and keep the lands from sinking."

"It sounds simple enough," the younger redhead shrugged.

"Yeah," Asch said, rolling his eyes. "We just have to get in and get out without getting ourselves killed."

Clouds hung low over the small city as they approached, reflecting the ominous mood that had settled over everyone. Ginji prepared to set the Albiore down not far outside of Sheridan. Jade was unsure about how much progress had been made in his absence and there was a good chance the Albiore's hangar was still being used to build one of the devices they would be needing. Everyone
hoped the Tartarus was ready to go; none of them fancied sitting around and dwelling on the state of world affairs or giving their nerves a chance to build up.

Everything was teetering on a razor's edge, and it was about to go horribly wrong.

The chaos and the screaming could be heard long before the frantic group of travelers made it into the drowning city. Rain pummeled the citizens as they ran about, trying to find somewhere, anywhere, to escape to. Only a few dared to flee the city into the badlands. Though the chances they'd managed to escape death were slim, they would simply meet their fate at a different hand.

Oracle Knights had overtaken Sheridan. The downpour cleansed the silver armour of the blood stains that otherwise spattered across the mud and alongside the buildings. They had no discrimination, young and old, man and woman alike found their corpses lying in the streets. The craftsman were snatched, and brutally questioned before joining their families in the dark abyss known as death.

How dare they! Luke barely had time to process a thought before he found himself in the fray, blocking a spear as it raced towards a young girl's heart. He wouldn't- he refused to let this happen! Luke didn't care if it was a trap, he didn't give a damn what whoever was behind this wanted, he wasn't going to allow for them to hurt these people. He wanted, no, he had to protect them. No matter what, there would be no more deaths, no more cities would vanish from this world while there was something he could do about it.

Asch took up the fight behind his sibling. Damn it! What if it was some kind of trap? Two soldiers fell to his sword before he yanked Luke out of the path of a third. At this rate he was going to get himself killed!

'What the hell are you thinking?!' Asch demanded the frantic redhead.

'I can't- I won't let them die!'

'Luke, get a hold of yourself! You're all over the place. You won't do anyone any good if you die here.'

'I can't… I won't…'

It was no good, he wasn't getting through Luke's desperation. But why here? Why now? What was setting Luke off to the point that he couldn't even think straight? Was it the death? The eerie resemblance to the mining town that still haunted Luke's nightmares? Luke still couldn't let go, and in his ravaging mind, Sheridan and Akzeriuth were now one and the same. The people he felt he had to protect, only because he couldn't.

But Asch could understand Luke's feelings to some extent. The blood, the dead… just seeing the slaughter riled him. These were his people, his country, and even if they weren't; they hadn't done a thing! Who the hell had the right to pass this kind of judgment on them?!

"Damn it!" Asch's sword passed through the hole in another Oracle Knight's armour. This wasn't about the people of Sheridan, it never was. But that knowledge only confirmed exactly who was behind this, and who might be waiting for them deeper within Sheridan's core. "Where are Iemon and the others?"

"I don't see them in the immediate area," Natalia answered, loosing several arrows, only one of
which penetrated her target. "But there are too many soldiers. We'll have to stop them before looking elsewhere in the city."

"By then they might be-"

"Don't say it!" Ginji cut Guy off, smashing an Oracle Knight over the head with a wrench he happened to be carrying with him. "Uncle lemon, Aunt Tamara and everyone else are stronger than that. They won't give up that easily."

"Hey Jade," Guy whispered, falling back to defend the Colonel as he was casting. "What are the odds one of the God-Generals is here?"

Jade finished his arte and took out half a dozen soldiers. "Very good," the man replied sternly.

"We need to get out of here," Guy stated. "I doubt Sheridan was a way for them to vent their frustration."

"Indeed, it's very likely our project is the target," Jade agreed. "I didn't think Commandant Grants would sit back and watch."

"No, but I don't think any of us expected him to be this rash."

"It just shows how much of a threat this must be."

"Getting out of here is said than done though," Guy pointed out. "We can't exactly abandon all these people."

"Unfortunately, that's what they're counting on."

"Bastards!" Asch's sword came down on another Oracle Knight. The young monarch stopped to pull his dripping crimson hair out of his face. There was just no end to this! The Oracle Knights kept calling in reinforcements. They might be slowly draining the forces in the rest of the city, but that didn't mean a thing if they couldn't get to the Tartarus before the Oracle Knights managed to destroy it.

Luke pulled his sword from another soldier, there were just too many. But if he could hold their attention, get them all to attack him, maybe the citizens would be spared. At least it would give them a chance to run. Movement out of the corner of his eye caught the younger redhead's attention. Snipers! Damn them all, using the rain as a cover. Wait there was another one aim-

"Asch, look out!" Luke frantically called his voice drowned out by the continuously falling sheets of water. He wasn't going to make it! A pair of soldiers kept him from running to his sibling's defence. The Oracle Knight notched an arrow.

"Natalia!" Luke screamed at the Princess who was standing closer.

Luke? Natalia's eyes quickly flew up the building across from her cousin. No! Natalia pulled her bowstring taut and without even taking a second to aim, sent an arrow at the sniper. Her target plummeted from his perch, but not before he'd managed to fire his shot.

"Asch!"

The arrow splintered in midair, twin daggers reducing it to nothing more than twigs and a misshapen piece of metal. The head of pink hair swung around, her knives finding the neck of the nearest soldier and crippling him.
"Noir?!" The young bandit pulled her wet hair out of her face as the older redhead whirled around.

"The Dark Wings?!!" Anise exclaimed noticing the other two men that had also joined in the scuffle nearby. "What's going on here?"

"What the hell are you doing here?" Asch continued, impervious to his companion's varying reactions.

"Now really, honey." Noir ran her finger seductively up Asch's chin before slipping around him and stabbing an attacking Oracle Knight. "Is that any way to thank us after we just saved your life?"

"H-H-Honey?" Natalia stuttered. What did that Noir woman think she was doing?! That was her fiancée! And in the middle of a battle no less! Did she have no shame?

"Careful there, sweetheart," one of the men from the Dark Wings commented as he helped the fuming princess fend off a pair of soldiers. "You keep that up and you're going to shoot one of your friends."

"And who are you?" the Princess demanded.

"York or the Dark Wings, at your service," he replied with a quick bow. "But proper introductions will have to wait, I'm afraid." He smiled at the Princess who nodded in acknowledgement. She had no idea what in Yulia's name was going on, but Asch seemed okay fighting alongside them…and she trusted his judgment.

"Noir, you haven't answered me, what are you doing here?" Asch demanded.

"Oh, come on sweetie. Don't be like that," Noir replied in her usual singsong tone. Some things never changed, even in the heat of battle.

"Yeah boss," the third man replied. "We heard somethin' nasty was going down here and we thought you might be in trouble."

Woah, hold up a second! Boss? Anise nearly tumbled head first from Tokunaga as she, and her thoughts, screeched to a stop.

"Urushi!" Asch snapped.

"Oops, sorry boss."

"What's this?" Jade's eyes were alight with amusement. "Engaging in some illegal activities on the side?"

"Come on, no way Asch is behind the Dark Wings," Anise argued. "…Right?"

"Maybe not in charge, but I bet they're pretty good at finding out all that information Asch has been getting," Guy pointed out, rolling his eyes at Jade. His sense of humour sure picked weird times to kick in.

"Can we not talk about this right now?" Asch yelled in frustration as his blade met with another Oracle Knight. Asch threw all his irritation into his next few attacks, though it did little to make him feel better. Fighting off half of Daath was bad enough, this was the last he wanted to explain right now. There were fewer Oracle Knights, but even with only a handful of soldiers left, the citizens had no ability to resist them.
"I'm impressed," Anise commented to the pink-haired bandit as the two of them simultaneously took out an opponent. "I didn't think you guys could fight."

"Sweetie, we'd be some pretty pathetic bandits if we couldn't."

"Noir," Asch called out. "Can the three of you handle the rest of the soldiers? We have something else we have to take care of."

"You mean, someone else," Noir guessed.

"I need you to protect the citizens of the city."

"Of course, we'd be happy to," The young bandit answered with a wink. "For a bonus."

Asch rolled his eyes, a small grin tugging at his lips.

"You go take care of what you have to, honey," Noir told him. "We'll take care of things here."

"I'm counting on you."

"Don't you always?"

"Then don't let me down, and don't get yourselves killed."

"You sure don't make things easy. It's a good thing you're such a cutie."

"Thanks Noir," Asch finished, running off after the others into a nearby alley.

"Well," Noir turned to the dozen Oracle Knights remaining before them. "Looks like he's going to make us earn our pay this time."

"Yeah," Urushi replied. "But we're the Dark Wings, and we never back out on a job, even if it means breakin' the boss' rules."

"Not that I fancy dying in a place like this," York commented.

"It's nothing personal," Noir taunted the soldiers. "But you're not laying one finger on the people here." The bandit's pink eyes met her opponents' sending a few of them back a step. Narrowed and ablaze with a determination that no rain or soldier could put out, York and Urushi could only pity the fools before them that would try.

The streets beyond the central square where they had left the Dark Wings were bare. Well, bare of any kind of life that was. Evidence of the people who hadn't escaped the assault lay along the road in the form of bloodstained corpses. Damn them all! Even the children? Asch cursed under his breath. There was no excuse for just a pointless massacre, not by any stretch of the imagination. Van was going to answer for all of this, and he was going to pay for what he'd done to all these people.

What who had done?

A tiny voice in the back of Asch's mind prodded his conscience. Perhaps Van was the one with the twisted logic of what it meant to save the world, but who was it that led him to this place? It was them. They had undertaken a project to neutralize the core's vibrations; they had enlisted the help
of Sheridan's researchers. It was him who painted the small industrial city with a giant target, and loosed a hell bent lunatic on them. He knew. He knew Van wouldn't just sit back and watch, that his former instructor wouldn't let them proceed unchallenged. It was such a stupid oversight! And now… the people of Sheridan had paid the price.

This massacre was all his fault.

Something was bothering Asch. Guy quickly noted the increasing level of recklessness with which the redhead met the soldiers they came across. That wasn't like him at all. Everyone was bothered by what had become of Sheridan in their absence, but at this rate Asch was going to end up as bad as Luke.

The blond's best friend wasn't fairing very well, and everyone had a spare eye on him. Nothing anyone was saying seemed to be getting through to Luke and his mental state was shaky at best. But really could any of them blame him? If anything, it was probably their fault he was like that to begin with. Akzeriuth had bothered him to be sure, but it was how they treated him afterwards that had left the scar. That unforgettable and implacable need to protect, had been born that day when they had all abandoned him, attacked him, and forsaken him just for trying his hardest, and for failing to save Akzeriuth. That was a wound, that even time it seemed, wouldn't heal.

"G-Guy! Natalia! Tear!" The three trailing members of the group all stopped to see who had called to them.

"Noelle!" Guy hurried over to the blonde pilot followed by the rest of the group. Noelle looked nervously around her before running up to them from the small alleyway in which she was hiding.

"Noelle, you're alright!" Ginji ran up and took his trembling sister into his arms.

"W-What's going on here? I just walked into Sheridan and the next thing I know I'm being attacked by a bunch of Oracle Knights. They were killing everyone!"

"But you managed to escape, that's what's important," Guy tried to comfort the shaken young pilot.

"Yeah but… what about everyone else? Uncle Iemon and the others?" Noelle asked.

"We're on our way to check on them now," Tear explained. "You should come with us. You shouldn't be alone, and there isn't anywhere to hide that's guarantied to be safe." Noelle nodded in agreement as she detached herself from her brother's support.

"Here, Noelle, take this," Guy spoke up once they'd started walking again. The young pilot looked over to see her companion offering her a small dagger. Though she'd managed to shake off her initial hesitation, she wasn't ready for…

"I know you don't know how to fight, but you should at least have something to defend yourself with."

"Thank you," Noelle answered, hesitantly accepting the blond's gift.

"Don't worry, if anything happens, I'll protect you," Guy stated nobly.

Noelle couldn't resist a giggle at his antics. "That's a bit archaic, don't you think?"

"You really think so?"

"A little," Noelle answered, finding a great deal of amusement in Guy's disappointment. She
smiled at the realization that Guy's joking around had easily settled her nerves. "Hey, Guy," she spoke up. "Thank you."

"Noelle, watch it!" Guy snatched the girl by the shoulders and yanked her back. An arrow stuck itself into the ground where she had been standing. The young pilot looked up in time to see one of Natalia's arrows strike the sniper and send him plummeting from the roof.

"Are you okay?" Guy asked, his hands still firmly on her shoulders.

"I- I'm fine," Noelle managed, still a little shaken by her close encounter.

"Are the two of you alright?" Natalia inquired. "I apologize; I should have been keeping a sharper eye out for snipers."

"No we're fine," Guy provided. An awkward silence fell over everyone and the blond couldn't for the life of him figure out why everyone was staring at him. Then it suddenly dawned on him exactly where his hands were.

"Gyah!" Guy practically screamed and flew back from the female pilot looking to the world as if he was ready to cut off his own limbs. Guy cowered behind Luke, trembling harder than the Albiore's engine. He had actually- oh it was stupid, he was saving her life! But he still couldn't shake the feeling of utter repulsion he felt and his heart sure as hell wasn't slowing down any.

Luke didn't find any of the amusement that had washed over the others and the mirth they shared didn't seem to register with him at all. He seemed almost detached; worn, perhaps, by the constant rush of emotions that he had been going through. But whatever the reason, it really concerned Guy; not to mention giving him a much needed focus to get his mind off of what he had just done. He let out another shudder.

"Wow, I'm impressed, Anise commented. "You actually willingly touched a girl. Does that mean you're cured of your phobia?" Anise slyly approached the young servant in question.

"I don't think he's cured quite yet," Tear commented when Anise's attempts sent him backing into a corner.

"Well then why did you grab Noelle?" Anise inquired.

"S-She was in trouble," Guy managed. "I just wasn't thinking about it at the time. I was more focused on saving her life than..

"Than the fact she was female," Natalia finished.

"And to think we needed a sniper to figure that out," Anise commented.

"Well with snipers present, we can deduce who it is we're likely dealing with," Jade spoke up in attempts to get back to the matter at hand. He could appreciate everyone wanted a distraction, but they couldn't afford to waste time.

"Well, all the squads have snipers," Tear pointed out. "But there's a good chance that Major Legretta is here."

"Yeah, but who else?" Anise wondered.

"Who else?" Natalia asked, a confused tone in her voice.
"Yeah," Anise replied. "There are way more knights here than any one squad would ever dispatch at a time. There's got to be at least two squads here."

"That means we're likely dealing with at least two God-Generals," Jade pointed out. "We'd best hurry along."

Everyone quickly continued forward, a cloud of concern hanging heavily over them like the rain that still pounded down on them. Taking a leaf from Noelle's book, they ducked in and out of alleyways to avoid further confrontations with any Oracle Knights. The inner city streets were completely devoid of life, so there wasn't any purpose to engaging in pointless conflict. Asch only hoped that the citizens had barred themselves inside their homes and not that they were all among the corpses that littered the ground.

"It's just a door and a bunch of old geezers! What's taking so long?"

Everyone crowded against the wall of the alley, Tear and Asch up at the front managed to peak around the corner.

"We're sorry ma'am!" One of the oracle knights replied. "It seems like they've barricaded the door with something, we're having trouble getting in."

"Our orders were to open that hangar and destroy whatever is inside! If Van gets back here and you don't have that door open you are going to be in more trouble than you even want to imagine."

"Ma'am!"

"Major Cantabile…" Tear mumbled.

"I'm more concerned about what she said about Van," Asch spoke up. "If he's here…"

"We could be in some serious trouble," Guy finished. "But I'm worried about Lemon and the gang. They're probably in that hangar, and it's only a matter of time before they get inside."

"As much as I hate to do this, it doesn't look like we have much choice," Jade mused. "We'll have to split up. We don't have the time to deal with Cantabile and find Commandant Grants."

"I'll stay here and help deal with Cantabile," Natalia offered.

"Then I'll stay too," Asch spoke up.

"No," Jade argued. "You are probably one of the things Van is after."

"Isn't that all the more reason for him to stay?" Tear inquired.

"No, Van will simply kill whoever goes after him and come after Asch. If Asch goes after the Van, then he may hesitate as he has before to try and avoid doing anything that would set Asch against him," the Colonel explained.

"He's way too late for that," Asch spat.

"Ahh, but he doesn't believe that," Jade pointed out.

"Don't worry Asch," Guy placed a comforting hand on the redhead's shoulder. "I'll stay here and keep an eye on Natalia."

"I'll stay and help with the rescue mission too!" Anise offered, her voice far more cheerful than she
was probably feeling.

"Alright then," Jade surmised. "Natalia, Guy and Anise will remain and rescue the people trapped in the warehouse. Ginji, Noelle, if you'd assist them as best you can and keep an eye on Ion."

"Of course!" Ginji agreed.

"Meanwhile, Asch, Luke, Tear and I will try and find Commandant Grants and find out exactly what he intends to accomplish with a mess such as this one."

"Be careful, there's no telling what he'll do," Natalia said, her eyes fixed on her fiancée. "Especially after what Sync said in Mt. Roneal… please."

"I know, I will."

Spinoza was pelted by the water that ran off the roofs as he ducked into an alley. He continued to run, knowing full well such a trivial move would do nothing to shake off his pursuer. This was utterly atrocious. He'd always known that Van was twisted, but this bordered on sheer lunacy! The speed at which the forces had overtaken the city… why they hadn't even had the chance to get the innocent out of the line of fire, much less mount some kind of resistance. And with the war there was scarcely a soldier to be found.

Not that every soldier in the Kimlascan army would have kept Van at bay. He should have known better than to flee to Sheridan, to so openly oppose him. If he hadn't then maybe all these innocent people wouldn't have died. Spinoza could only pray they'd forgive this foolish old man for wanting to do some good with what he had left of his wretched life.

"How long do you intend to keep running?" Van mocked as he caught Spinoza's collar and threw him forward. The researcher crashed into the stone wall of the old warehouse and fell to the ground.

"How long to you intend to keep up this senseless butchering?"

"This is all your doing, for trying to hide in this place. I warned you of the consequences. You knew what would happen if you didn't cooperate with me."

"You didn't have to kill all the others. If you are after my life, then take it, but leave them out of it," Spinoza argued.

"I'm afraid that isn't possible at this point," Van replied far too calmly, raising his sword. "They're all involved, and they will all pay the price for your deeds."

"You monster…"

"It's not too late, you know. You can still change your mind. Your past accomplishments won't be overlooked, and I can offer you far more than those who hold your leash."

"I'd rather die," Spinoza spat.

"That can be arranged as well," Van's sword swung down.

"No it won't!" Luke's sword intercepted his teacher's and the redhead had to draw on every bit of his strength simply not to be crushed by the weight of Van's weapon.
"Van!" Asch charged the Commandant, forcing him to withdraw his sword from Luke and Spinoza. Van easily parried Asch's strike, but the opening was all Luke needed to get Spinoza out of the line of fire.

"We meet again," Van threw Asch back. The Commandant didn't seem in the least bit surprised at their intervention, if anything, he had been planning on it all along. The elder redhead stumbled backwards several paces before regaining his balance. "Do you have an answer for me?"

"Answer?" Asch's voice rose above the steady sound of the rain against rooftops. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I told you, didn't I? The next time we meet that wouldn't have any more time to reconsider. Will you help me save this world?"

Asch stared down his former teacher, his emerald eyes ablaze. Every fiber of his being wanted to take Van's ridiculous idea of salvation and shove it right back down his throat but Jade's words from earlier still hung over him.

As long as Van didn't know for sure, he'd hesitate to kill the others in fear of turning Asch against him.

Asch was the first one to charge, his sword cleanly meeting Van's as it used to when they would spar. Then, just like in those days, Van shifted his weight, throwing Asch off balance, and retaliating with a strike of his own. Asch blocked the second hit, and it took a considerable amount of effort to throw it off. This was no game, and Van was playing for keeps.

"Is that a no?" Van inquired, wasting no time in striking out at Luke who attempted to catch the Commandant off guard. "Surely you've realized the truth by now."

"Van, what are you doing here? Why did you kill all these people?!" Tear yelled as a battle quickly developed in front of her.

"It was necessary," her brother replied. His eyes meeting hers for a brief moment before he returned to the battle. Tear swallowed the lump in her throat. She couldn't have seen what she thought she just saw. It was her imagination getting the better of her. No! She couldn't let her emotions get the better of her now! Everyone was going to need her help in this fight. Though it had barely been for a second, she couldn't shake the hurt look in Van's eyes from her mind. She didn't want to fight him either! Why did it have to come down to this? Why couldn't they find a path to follow together?

"What do you need me for so badly?" Asch demanded.

"I need you because you're you. No one else can fill the spot in this world that you hold."

"You mean in your twisted replica world!"

"Is a world of replicas really so twisted? You don't seem to share that opinion about this thing!" Van swung around and sent Luke skidding down the street.

"And what do you hope to accomplish with this replica world?" Jade asked, his artes doing little to slow the Commandant. At best they forced him to dodge or would impede an attack, disadvantages that he easily made up for with his superior skills. It made Jade uneasy, he knew that Commandant Grants was supposed to be talented, but his level of skill far surpassed anything that the Necromancer had anticipated. Asch had the right strategy. If Van had a mind to, they'd be dead in less than a minute.
"I will create a world free of the taint from Yulia's Score," Van explained. "People of this world are consumed by it, and they sit back destroying their own lives for it. No one has any ambition, any desire to accomplish anything, because they simply follow the Score. People of this world have forgotten how to dream."

"You're wrong, people will always desire a better future!" Luke protested.

"Did those who sent you to Akzeriuth desire a better future? They forsook the futures of all those people, they'd have thrown Asch's life away had I not intervened. In the end, the Score still dominates them all."

"But that doesn't mean that you can give up hope on this world!" Tear cried out, trying her best to stay focused on keeping Asch and Luke's injuries in check.

"This world has long since dug its own grave," Van stated. "The Score has seen to that."

"So you will destroy this world and create a new world of replicas that know nothing of the Score?" Jade surmised.


"But your plan has a fatal flaw," Jade pointed out. "Replicas have always been unstable entities, and very few of them survive indefinitely. The Seventh Fonons that compose their beings are attracted to the Seventh Fonons in the Planet Storm. Like fonons attract like; your world will never survive."

"That is where you're wrong. Asch has the power to fix all that."

"What the hell do you mean?" the redhead in question asked, his growing fury giving him no advantage in the battle he was fighting. Van was just toying with him; was he still really that weak? Who could he protect like this?!

"The answer is simple. Destroy Lorelei, and the Seventh Fonons in the Planet Storm will all eventually vanish. Without the Seventh Fonon, the Score can no longer be read and the replicas will all survive."

"So you want to use Asch to destroy Lorelei?!" Luke asked incredulously.

"More specifically, he intends to use Asch's hyperresonance," Jade clarified.

"Indeed," Van's blade met his eldest student's. "This is the last time I will ask you, Asch. Will you help me bring about a future for this planet?"

"Not on your life," Asch spat, jumping back as his former instructor forced his way through the redhead's defence. Now the real battle would start.

"Then in that case you're better off dead."

"I don't think so!" Three well placed arrows halted Van's assault and forced him back several paces. Guy flew in, taking advantage of the temporary opening to force Van back and put some space between him and the twins.

"Are you guys alright?" Anise asked, taking a place beside Luke.

"We managed to get them to retreat for now," Natalia provided. "However…"

"What happened?" Jade demanded.

"Those blasted buffoons!" Iemon's voice rose above Natalia's. "Class I has gone too far this time! They've practically ruined everything! Why if I ever see those low life conniving rats again I'll be prying our plans out of their cold dead fingers!"


"It seems Class I has been working with Van. They took advantage of the chaos to steal the plans to the Albireo and many of our other projects. But that doesn't matter right now, you have to get the Tartarus and go," Tamara intervened. "Now!"

"In case you haven't noticed, we're a bit busy at the moment," Tear provided, doing her utmost to keep her attention on the battle in front of her. Anise, Guy and Asch were doing their best to keep Van occupied but they were quickly failing, and it was taking all of Tear's focus to stay on top of their injuries.

"No, we have to go now!" Ginji repeated. "The people from Class I are trying to sabotage the mission by activating the sonic barrier. Our clock is already ticking."

"Damn it!" Asch yelled, blocking his instructor's strike. They didn't have the time for this! And Asch highly doubted Van was going to call it a day because they had to go.

"It seems we'll have to finish this another day," Jade commented, setting off a wind based arte that forced the Commandant out of the fray.

"You're not going anywhere."

"Shit, Legreta!" Asch cursed, barely getting out of her bullet's path in time. A dozen Oracle Knights quickly joined her, blocking their escape route.

"I've waited for this day," Legreta said, a malicious smile dawning her face as her guns pointed straight at Asch's head.

"Go!" lemon yelled. Legreta's bullets shot up at the clouds as lemon shoved her aside. "You have to complete this mission."

"We've all put our hearts and souls into this project," Tamara agreed. The old woman grabbed a long metal bar from the ground and was using it to try and keep the Oracle Knights from completely blocking the road.

"What are you guy's doing?!" Luke yelled. "Get out of here! Take shelter!"

"Boy, don't underestimate the elderly!" Tamara yelled back, two knights fell unconscious at the hands of her makeshift weapon. "If this mission fails now everything will go to waste. We won't let our hopes and dreams die here!"

"Watch your delusions die," Legreta raised her gun again.

"You'll never destroy us, or our world!" lemon charged Legreta again, aiming for her wrists in a desperate attempt to divert her fire. The blonde God-General jumped pack and shot the man where he stood.
"Uncle lemon, no!" Noelle shrieked.

"Why you-" Tamara turned but she hadn't gotten halfway around before the second bullet was planted in her skull.

Ginji grabbed his sister and forced her into his arms. Though she may not have seen it, her shrieks and sobs told him she knew what had happened none the less.

No… Luke watched on in horror, the reality of what had happened not quite sinking in. How... how could they? The bodies of their friends still lay blood-soaked in the mud, hounding that horrible truth known as reality. Why did they have to die? They had only been trying to help. They had only wanted to help everyone...

Damn it all to hell! Guy parried one of Van's blows, one that had come dangerously close for his liking; but his attention just wasn't on the man in front of him, no matter how much he knew it should be. The blond retaliated with several rapid strikes, doing more to vent some of that pent up anger than to gain any sort of offensive advantage...and he wasn't the only one. In fact, Jade and Tear looked to be the only ones who'd managed to stay unaffected, at least on the outside. But none of them were going to escape this one unscathed... Guy could feel it as he matched blows with his former friend. How dare he do this to all these innocent people! Didn't he see he was doing the exact same thing that had been done to Hod! Even the women and children!

"Colonel! We're gonna have to move," Anise yelled back as she engaged Legretta. Natalia and Luke were occupying the rest of the Oracle Knights while everyone else was focused on Van.

"Ginji, Noelle, are you going to be okay?" Natalia asked.

Ginji nodded, tears still running from his sapphire eyes. Noelle still had her face buried into his chest and her shoulder shook as she sobbed. "We won't give up now; we have to see their dream through until the end," Ginji finally said with all the determination he could muster.

"Asch!" Jade called, after listening for their pilot's response. He was grateful Ginji had such a solid head on his shoulders. However, not everyone, it seemed, was quite so strong of spirit. Asch had become unusually avid on the offence since Class M had been struck down. None-the-less now wasn't the time for Asch to be letting his emotions get in the way. The window of opportunity was closing, and the entire world would be lost if they were to miss it.

"Not now!" Asch yelled back.

"We need to retreat now, while there's still an opening. Don't let their sacrifice be for nothing."

Van jumped back, separating himself from his opponents. None of them posed any kind of concern to him, but with Cantabile out of the running and Legretta engaged, the chances of their escape weren't out of the realm of possibility. And that couldn't be allowed. Today was the day. Either they joined him in his new world, or they could die.

"Retreat now, and I will slaughter every person in this city. ' Van threatened, his tone of voice was such that there was no doubt he would. A small grin of satisfaction curled across his lips when they all stopped retreating. They wouldn't leave; they were all too soft. Did't they see that to save the world there would have to be sacrifice? Until they accepted that, they would never be able to stop him.

"You'll do no such thing," a voice came from behind the Commandant.

White Knights and Kimlascan soldiers swarmed into Sheridan. Many hurried to other parts of the
city, but several of them placed themselves between Legretta and the group, forcing Luke, Natalia and Anise back and out of the fight. A dozen of the White Knights lined themselves up, forming a barrier between Van and his opponents.

"Father?!" Luke called. He couldn't believe his eyes. What in all of Auldrant was their father doing here?

"What are you doing here?" Asch demanded.


"No," Asch protested. "This isn't your fight!"

"But Father-" Luke began simultaneously with Asch.

"Silence! Both of you! You both have a job to do and you are to go do it!"

"Come on you two," Guy grabbed Luke's arm. 'He's right, we have to go."

"But what about Sheridan-"

"Nothing will happen to this city," Duke Fabre stated. Luke looked back at his father, unable to come up with the words to protest. He knew their father was right, but he couldn't help but worry. These people were involved because of them, to run away and abandon them just didn't seem right. But time wasn't on their side. He would have to trust what his father said, that everything would be okay.

"Heh, nothing will happen to this city?" Van's eyes narrowed on the man before him. Asch and his replica had gotten away, taking their entire band with them. But they weren't going to get far as long as he had something to say about it. He would make them regret their choice to run. "We'll see about that."

"Yes," the Duke replied, his voice dangerously calm as he drew his sword. "We shall."
Over the course of their journey, Natalia and her companions had been through a lot. True they had visited many places and done all sorts of things, but even amongst themselves they had experienced an unimaginable amount of ups and downs. They had fought together and against each other, laughed, cried, shared secrets and even challenged a lifetime of beliefs. Score knows, she'd made more than her share of mistakes. Yet, in spite of all their experiences, good or otherwise, never had everyone's spirits been quite as uneasy as they were now, except, perhaps, for those dark days after Akzeriuth. But to be able to compare the atmosphere now to such a time merely spoke of just how affected they all were.

The loss of their companions still heavily weighed on everyone's mind, not that anyone dared speak of it. For Ginji's sake, more so than anything. He was utterly devastated and rightfully so. Had such an atrocity occurred in Baticul, had someone killed her father and friends... Natalia doubted she would ever find it in her heart to go on. There were areas in which her strength of will was sorely lacking, and she would be the first to admit it.

Luke seemed to be faring better, at the very least he seemed back to normal given the circumstances. His demeanor in Sheridan had shaken her more than she'd care to admit, and it seemed to have taken to Asch as well. Though she knew her fiancée had a dreadful habit of putting on a strong front, the lack thereof worried her even more. It showed just how bothered he was.

But they were all fighting against that little twinge of guilt inside. No one dared to say it, but there was no doubt it was their involvement that had drawn Van to Sheridan. Now there were many people dead, innocents, as well as their companions. True they had been able to save some, but it didn't seem like nearly enough. Natalia certainly hoped her uncle would see to it that those who were left didn't meet the same fate.

"I think I'm going to go check on the Albiore," Ginji stood up from his seat.

"Didn't you already give it a once over when you first landed in the hold? And then three more times yesterday," Anise pointed out, taking the opportunity to stretch. They were all sitting at Tartarus' controls, keeping an eye on things, but the autopilot feature kept them cruising along. It would still be another day or two before they reached Akzeriuth...or its crater anyways. The former Fon Master Guardian tilted her head curiously but Ginji didn't answer.

"With all the maintenance you've given it, you could probably have built a third Albiore by now," Guy commented. "You worried about Noelle?"

"Yeah," Ginji confessed.

"I know there's really no point in saying it, but try not to be. Noelle decided herself that she wanted to stay so she could help with the peace treaty. She can take care of herself, I'm sure she'll be just fine."

"I know..." Ginji mumbled. "But I'm her big brother it's-"

"It's your job to worry," Asch finished for him, sending a understanding smile when the pilot looked his way.

"Don't forget that Duke Fabre was there as well," Tear pointed out. "I'm sure he won't let anything happen to her or any of the other citizens."
"But will Father really be able to hold them all off?" Luke asked worriedly. "I mean, he's up against Master Van." Guy looked towards his best friend, and though the look in his eyes told Luke that he had an answer, he couldn't quite manage to say it.

"Given his past military accomplishments, I'm certain he'll be able to hold his own," Jade provided in the blond's stead. "He wasn't leading Kimlasca's forces on Hod for nothing."

"Van's changed a lot since then," Guy stated.

"Well Duke Fabre hasn't been sitting around doing nothing either," the Colonel pointed out. "And I doubt he would have allowed Van around his sons if he did not think he could best the man."

"What makes you say that?" Asch asked.

"Just a hunch," Jade shrugged. "Regardless, Ginji, if you're still looking for something to occupy your time I've something I'd like you to work on."

"What is it?" The silver haired pilot inquired.

"The measurements we procured at Mt. Roneal weren't programmed into the calculation device on the Tartarus. It needs to be done before we reach the core or we won't properly neutralize the vibrations. Also, you'll need to install the second fonic barrier onto the Albiore before we have to leave."

"I don't mind working on it," Ginji replied. "But, I don't really know a lot about how it works. Normally I'd experiment with it, but this is a bit too important to be fiddling around with."

"I'll come assist you in a moment," Jade provided before shooing the pilot off to fetch the frequency counter they'd brought back from Keterburg. "Guy, I take it you've watched long enough to work the controls?"

"Well yeah, but..."

"Then you can take over command for now. Call me if anything happens."

"Whoa, Jade! Are you sure?" Guy asked in shock. Though he knew that's where the conversation had been leading, Jade had never once relinquished control of the Tartarus. It was the only thing he had ever seemed possessive about. Not that anyone tended to argue; its not like they had known how to control the massive landship.

"The Tartarus is driving itself, I'm sure you'll manage," Jade provided taking a hand out of his pocket to wave the blond toward the controls as he exited the bridge.

"And Jade just triggered the apocalypse," Asch remarked.

"Hey!" Guy protested, throwing an apple at the offending redhead. Asch caught the fruit and added it to his own breakfast that was sitting next to the control panel he was in charge of.

"Hope you didn't plan on eating that," Asch taunted.

"Hey, I'm at the controls, I'm in charge," Guy shot back playfully.

Luke chuckled at their antics, something neither the blond nor the redhead failed to notice. It brought a smile to both their faces; Luke had been far too quiet over this trip for their liking. Not to mention the fact that everyone was a bit worried about him. How couldn't they be... after all, they
were going back to Akzeriuth. Asch sat back in his chair and took a bite out of Guy's apple, returning his attention to the screen in front of him. He didn't like the potential outcomes of that one bit. Especially after going through what he had in Sheridan.

"So how much longer until we get there?" Anise asked.

"Another couple days at least," Asch provided. "But knowing the old man we're likely to sacrifice a few nights sleep to get there sooner."

"I'm afraid I can't argue with his logic this time around," Natalia pointed out. "Time is of the essence, and I'm afraid we don't have much of it."

"Yeah," Luke agreed. "There's a lot riding on us. We have to succeed... we can't let everyone's sacrifice be in vain."

"We won't," Tear offered her companion a comforting smile. "For everyone who gave their lives for the sake of a future for this world, we can't fail."


Not now. Not ever.

If it weren't for the memories that his nightmares dredged up, Luke might not have even noticed Akzeriuth at all. There wasn't anything there after all. Just a hole; nothing to indicate that the mining town had ever existed. But it was proving to more than impossible for the young noble to forget. His nightmares seemed to only increase in intensity the closer they came to the fallen city. Now, as he stared at the crater walls, he could feel it... the cold flesh rubbing against his arms, the deathly grips of the dying people, the suffocating sea of mud and miasma... it was all there, even while he was awake.

"Hey Luke, are you okay? Are you cold or something?" Guy approached his best friend and placed a hand on each of Luke's shoulders. Luke had his arms wrapped tightly around his chest, his hands almost white as he clutched them. At the comforting pressure of Guy's gesture Luke turned his head and met Guy's gaze. He tried to smile. He didn't fool anyone.

Though the two of them were standing on the deck, things quickly grew dark around them. After passing through the Qliphoth they journeyed even deeper down, towards the planet's core. Here where no light, not even the dim illumination of the Qliphoth, was able to reach. Guy kept his firm grasp on Luke, though his friend's shivering seemed to have subsided, the blond had an inkling that temperature had nothing to do with it.

He wanted to say something, anything, to bring some comfort to his distraught companion before him, but he didn't know what to say. What could he possibly offer his best friend, especially when he was part of the reason things had come to this. It was an impossible battle, and Luke was fighting it alone. He shouldn't be, he shouldn't have to... after all, he was only seven. Maybe he had an upper hand in terms of life experience, but he was still a child. It was just... too easy to forget that. Luke let out another shudder, and Guy could only wonder what just went through his head. Well, he may not have been there for Luke then but...

"You're not alone," Guy whispered comfortingly into Luke's ear. "Whatever battle you're fighting... I'll fight it with you if you'll let me." The blond took his hands off of Luke's shoulders. He could see better now. Luke didn't look like he'd responded to what Guy had said, which was fine for the
time being. They could talk about things at a better time. For now, it looked like there was a distant light coming from below them... was there some kind of light source in the core?

It was a good thing; Guy suddenly realized he hadn't really thought things through. Jade had moved the calculation device, outer shell and all, onto the bridge where it stood the least chance of being damaged within the core. Of course, that meant they would have to activate the machine and cross the deck to get to the hold and into the Albiore. That wasn't going to be easy if everything was pitch black. After all, the Tartarus was on its final voyage; no one bothered to replace the fonstones that lit up the deck.

What the? A huge mass flew by the Tartarus as the ship continued to plummet into the core. Guy watched it in the faint light, unable to quite avert his gaze. Just what was this feeling? It seemed as if the stone had also drawn Luke's attention, but the look on the redhead's face told Guy he didn't feel the same way. To Luke, that strange stone wasn't... familiar. But if Luke didn't know it, than why did it ring a bell with him?

Just where had he seen that fonstone before?

"What's the matter Guy?" Luke's voice startled the blond, almost more so than the strange sense of familiarity he had with a rock in the core.

"N-Nothing," Guy shook off the weird feeling and eyed his best friend. Luke was looking at him curiously, every trace of his strange demeanor had vanished. "No really, it isn't anything," Guy repeated when Luke wouldn't give up. "That rock reminded me of something I'd seen before, but I was probably imagining it."

"What did it remind you of?" Luke prodded.

"I honestly have no idea," Guy shrugged. "But enough about me, how are you holding up?"

"Sorry, I was just... thinking about things," Luke finally managed. "I didn't mean to ignore you."

"That's alright," Guy patted his friend on the back. "But you know, sometimes it doesn't hurt to share things. It won't be so complicated if you have two people thinking about it."

"Thanks, I'll think about it."

"Well that defeats the point," Guy rolled his eyes and Luke laughed. The blond servant smiled; it looked like Luke really would be okay.

For now.

Asch tapped his fingers nervously against the control panel before him. They had finally made it to the core. A golden light illuminated a miasma filled cavern far below the reaches of any inhabitant of Auldrant. This was the Tartarus' final destination... just as soon as that old man picked somewhere to stop!

Asch realized he was being unfair, all things considered it was important to find somewhere the Tartarus would stay for... well for the rest of eternity hopefully. It was just that his nerves were so high-strung... he just wanted out of there. The clock was ticking and there were precious few hours left on it. Not that Asch fancied the idea that the Tartarus would become dislodged and stop working five or even ten years down the road, but that was a problem for later, when he had his
sanity back.

"This should suffice," Jade pulled the Tartarus to a halt. Several anchors were launched and lodged themselves into the stone walls, holding the great ship in place.

"Is everything ready?" Natalia asked. "Not to be the pessimist, but it won't give out in a few years, will it? We need this to last as long as possible."

"Natalia's right," Ion agreed. "The possibility of reviving the Sephiroth with our current knowledge is almost zero. We need to be sure we do this right and that it will last."

"At the very least it should buy us some time to do a bit of learning," Jade commented, which really did nothing to reassure any of them. "Where are Luke and Guy?"

"We're right here," Luke spoke up.

Tear met Luke's emerald eyes and was glad to see him doing better. He hadn't been looking very well ever since their approach on Akzeriuth and had retreated to the deck to get some air. Of course, it hadn't taken Guy long to follow him out to make sure he was okay. She wanted to go too, but no one else could be spared from the controls. Asch had assured them Luke wasn't going to do anything rash and only wanted time to think, but how could he be so sure of that?

"When you were up on the deck, did you happen to notice if the fonic glyph was still intact?" Jade began entering a sequence of codes on the terminal in front of him.

"It didn't look damaged," Luke provided. "What's that glyph for anyways?"

"When activated it will produce a strong air current to push the Albiore out of the core. The pressure neutralizing device on the Albiore will only last about 3 hours, so it is essential if we are to get out in time."

"That sounds just lovely," Asch rolled his eyes, his voice just dripping in sarcasm.

"It will work," Jade argued, finishing the last of his input. "Now let's be off, we've little time to spare."

The mysterious light that came up from the core lit up the Tartarus' deck, drawing out the fonic glyph that had been carved upon it. The miasma was surprisingly thick down here; was it really any wonder it had seeped up into the Qliphoth? Asch brought up the rear as he hurried Luke out of the bridge. Ginji was already waiting for them on the Albiore, and they only had a scant few hours to get out of there. It was going to be close no matter what way you looked at it.

There was no warning, no faint throb to tell of its coming, just a head splitting pain the likes of which Asch had never experienced... and Asch had experienced a lot. In the seven years since Luke was born, both of them had fought through more headaches than he cared to count, but none of them even came close to this. Someone could have run him through with a sword and it would have probably been less painful than the stabbing that ran through his head. He found his thoughts to be no more than a scattered mess, unable to realize anything but the mind numbing pain that had engulfed them.

But now wasn't the time... they didn't have any to spare. Asch couldn't let this stop him, once they got onto the Albiore he could give in, rest, whatever he needed to do, but not before then! He just-had to- The redhead only made it two more steps before he fell to his knees. Luke dropped right behind him.
"Asch! Luke!" Natalia called out, finding her path blocked by Jade's arm. The Colonel also held Tear back, refusing to allow either of them to the boys' side. But why? What was the matter? Couldn't he see they were hurt somehow?! Asch was on his knees, his elbows barely keeping his head off the ground, where Luke lay curled up on himself. Natalia tried to break past Jade's blockade only have him snatch her arm and haul her back.

"Master!" Mieu attempted to bounce towards his master only to have Anise snatch him. She knew when to go along with the Colonel, and given just how serious he looked, this was one of those times. She kept her other eye on Ion, but he got the idea and remained fixed to the spot, all the while fixing his worried gaze on Luke and Asch.

"Jade, what's going on?" Tear demanded, her own mind screaming at her to go help her friends.

"If you'd both calm down a moment, you'd notice the sheer amount of Seventh Fonons in the air right now," Jade stated sternly. Both girls froze and realized just what Jade was saying. Neither of them had ever seen remotely close to that many fonons, Seventh or otherwise, in such close quarters before.

"If either of you were to run to their side, much less attempt to heal them right now, you could very easily set off a hyperresonance," Jade continued once they'd stopped trying to reach the boys. "I won't risk it, here of all places."

"Then what do we do?" Natalia asked, her voice betraying how frantic she was feeling.

"We've no choice but to wait for them to get over whatever this is," Jade replied.

"I don't know if you've noticed Jade, but we don't exactly have all the time in the world," Guy added, his own voice sharper than usual. It had been forever since Luke had one of those headaches, why now? And why was it so bad that he was practically incapacitated?

"In the worse case Guy and I will have to fetch them, but considering how little we know about the circumstances, I'd rather avoid contact if we can," Jade stated as calmly as he was able. He had a very good idea exactly what might be going on, but there were some things that even he knew almost nothing about. He couldn't predict what the outcomes might be, so he couldn't risk the safety of any more of his charges. The outcome of this... would depend entirely on the twins' resilience.

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Asch could faintly hear voices in the distance. The others were talking about them... he tried to listen, to focus on something else, but was rewarded by another wave of spine curling pain. He had to- was Luke-

You've finally come, you who are the same as me. Can you hear my voice? I must speak with you, let me... thank you.

The pain slowly began to abide; bit by bit it retreated leaving a strange warmth in its stead. Asch gulped in breaths of air, not realizing just how deprived he had been. Though it was mixed with miasma, the air relaxed his chest and slowly cleared his mind as the pain retreated. Whatever that was, he had every intention of never experiencing it again.

'Luke, are you-

Asch froze dead in his tracks. Rather than the open door he had come to know as his connection to Luke, he found a wall. There were no words to describe it, no explanation that he could fathom;
instead of his thoughts passing through to Luke, they came to a screeching halt. The older redhead frantically pounded up against the strange barrier he found in his mind, but the harder he fought, the more it solidified.

'Luke! Luke! Are you okay?! What's going on- Answer me Luke!' The eldest sibling continued to fight, trying to force his words through. He wouldn't- no he refused to give up. He was not going to lose his brother. Not here, not now, not ever.

As Asch continued to fight, a soft and gentle feeling slowly began to leak out from the barrier and diffused through his mind. It was a warm feeling, one of calmness and serenity. It's okay. Don't worry. Everything will be fine.

No! Asch shook the feeling off, ignoring the thoughts that wavered across his mind. He wasn't going to be comforted, he wasn't going to be appeased. He didn't know what was going on, or what was doing this... but there was one thing he was sure of: whatever the hell this was it was going to give Luke back!

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Luke had made it back onto his feet when Anise could finally breathe again. Just what had happened to the two of them to make them drop like that? Sure Guy had mentioned that they get weird headaches sometimes, but from what she had gathered, they were never quite this bad. She should have known something would happen though. They were in a rush, and that automatically meant that nothing would go smoothly.

Asch pulled himself up so fast Anise almost missed it. One second he was on his knees, the next he had spun around to face Luke. But in spite of how fast he'd moved, not one of them missed the look of sheer and utter fury on his face. Now what?! They weren't secretly mad at each other again were they? There was a time and a place, and this wasn't it.

"Luke!" Asch yelled at his sibling whose back was still turned. There was absolutely no reaction from the younger redhead. He simply stood there, his back to everyone. What was going on? Had Luke done something to cause this or to upset Asch somehow?

"What the hell are you and what did you do to him?!" Asch stared at Luke's back, refusing the soft and calming feelings he still felt flowing over him. He wasn't going to let whatever this was take Luke from him.

"Dammit!" Asch shouted when he still got no response. "I swear to Yulia if you don't give Luke back I'll- I'll-" Asch was so mad he couldn't even finish his threat.


Finally, Luke let out a sigh and turned around, looking Asch straight in the eyes. Luke's eyes, however, were no longer a matching emerald but instead a blazing orange and golden, almost as if a fire flickered behind them. Only now did everyone notice the soft golden glow that enveloped their companion, only adding to the depth and brilliance of his eyes. Luke... or rather whatever was possessing Luke, smiled softly.

The innocence and carefree light that had shone in Luke's face was gone, and though it was still their friend's face, it wasn't Luke. His expression was different, filled with an ancient wisdom and an even older sadness.

"Lorelei," Asch finally concluded, his voice still seething in bitterness. Lorelei's smile widened and
his eyes warmed a bit.

"That's right," Lorelei spoke using Luke's voice. Much like his expression had, Luke's voice no longer carried the gentle undertones or childish edge it had when he was whining; rather it felt imbued with a strength and presence Luke never had. "I am Lorelei, the Seventh Fonon itself... as are you."

"The aggregate sentence of the Seventh Fonon..." Jade mumbled, the gears in his head turning unexpectedly quickly. "Its existence was hypothetical but... if it really exists..."


"Don't be so concerned," Lorelei shook his head. "I have no intentions of harming you or this one. I simply wish to speak with you."

"Colonel..." Anise whispered as Lorelei continued to appease the flaming redhead whose brother he had abducted. "What's going on here?"

"It's exactly as it appears," Jade pushed his glasses up with his forefinger. "Lorelei is controlling Luke and using his body to speak with us."

"How are you controlling Luke?" Asch demanded, listening in on Jade's theories. He could still feel that warming feeling coming across his fonslots and only now realized that it was Lorelei's way of trying to calm him down.

"You are both a part of me... my very precious children." Lorelei replied, never losing his air of calm. And yet, even as he spoke such soft words, somewhere in those flickering eyes hid a mischievous light. His demeanor had a confidence and strength to it that was almost familiar.

"It's because Luke and Asch are both perfect isofons of Lorelei," Jade explained. "Asch's fonon frequency is identical to that of the Seventh Fonon, and Luke, in turn, is a perfect isofon of Asch. 'The light of the Sacred Flame' as they say."

"ND 2000. In Kimlasca shall be born one who inherits the power of Lorelei..." Ion quoted the Score. "So that's what it meant."

"But that doesn't explain how Lorelei is controlling Luke!" Anise protested.

"Lorelei is able to control Luke through his fonslots. The way in which a curse slot uses fonslots to manipulate memories and paralyze rational thought; only in this case, Lorelei is controlling Luke completely. I'd wager the difference lies in that fact that Luke and Lorelei share their fonon frequency. Even on a day to day basis they are, in a sense, connected, in the same way Asch and Luke are connected. Am I wrong?" Jade directed the last question at the being in question.

"No, you are correct," Lorelei confirmed with the hint of a smirk. "These two are my isofons, and as such, are a part of me. That is why I can ask this of no one but them."

"Then what is it you want?" Asch asked, his voice finally calming down a bit. "Why have you been trying to talk to Luke and I for so long?"

"I wish to be freed," Lorelei replied simply, his face becoming softer when he met Asch's gaze.

"Freed?" Asch seemed surprised by the answer.

"Right now, something large is absorbing my power. That is what is shaking the core and causing
the Sephiroth to go out of control. Your actions have quieted the core, but they will not last forever. As long as I remain here, this tragedy will only be delayed."

"Why are you doing this?" Asch's voice rose, the undertones clearly carrying his accusation.

"This is not my choice," Lorelei argued back, his voice betraying emotion that the redhead hadn't expected him to possess. "This is not the future I wished for this world."

"Then what exactly do you want from us? Why are you even here in the first place if you don't want to upset the world?"

"There are many tales Yulia never left behind. I do not have the luxury of explaining the world's history to you right now. What you do need to know, is that as long as I remain trapped, this world will not escape its destruction."

Asch thought on Lorelei's words for a moment, clearly trying to decide whether or not he could trust him. His eyes didn't seem to lie, but then again it was Luke's eyes he was looking into. Damn Lorelei playing Luke against him like that! But any perceived foul play aside, there was a truth to Lorelei's words that seemed to resonate with him. Almost as if it was something he had known all along. He just hadn't realized it yet.

"What are we supposed to do to free-" Asch's question was cut off when the Tartarus shook violently.

"There is no time," Lorelei replied. "You must leave this place. I'll return this one to you; you must escape quickly."

"But what about-?" Asch protested.

"When we meet again I will tell you what it is I ask of you. Until then, guard your lives carefully."

I've no one else but you...

With those last words Luke's eyes closed and Asch just managed to catch his sibling before he collapsed onto the Tartarus' deck. Relief washed over Asch's face.

"You idiot," Asch said softly, unable to suppress a chuckle as he held his unconscious sibling. "You passed out before Lorelei even came into the picture, didn't you?"

"Luke!" Tear hurried to the redheads' side, Jade finally allowing them to approach once most of the fonons had dissipated. "Is he going to be alright?"

"I should think so," Jade provided in Asch's stead. "But we can contemplate that on the Albiore."

"Jade's right," Guy agreed. "We wait any longer and the fonic barrier's going to give out on us."

Tear placed Luke's other arm over her shoulder, earning her a grateful smile from his sibling. "How about you," the melodist asked. "Are you going to be okay?"

Asch thought on it for a moment before nodding. Nothing felt amiss, and the barrier that had erected itself between him and Luke had vanished. "Yeah," he finally said. "But Jade will fix that for us if we don't get on that Albiore now." Tear chuckled.

"Then let's hurry back. We still have a lot of work to do."
Luke woke, or rather he thought he had woken, only to find himself in a vast sea of golden flames. But that wasn't really right, there weren't any flames, just a world of oranges and yellows that flickered like autumn leaves being tossed in the wind. Luke couldn't find any distinction, any barrier between ground and sky, it was just an endless world of burning gold.

What did his nightmares have in store for him now? What was the purpose of these strange colours that had invaded the darkness... the nothingness that he usually found? But... something else was different. There was no fear, no ice cold hands clutching his heart and squeezing his chest. It was calm, he felt safe; as if everything in the world would be alright.

Thank you.

The voice came from everywhere and nowhere all at once, a booming voice that encompassed his soul but at the same time, was as soft as a whisper in his ear.

"Who...?" Luke asked into the vast expanse of his mind.

I am Lorelei, the voice replied. I wanted to thank you for letting me speak with the other you.

"To Asch?"

Yes. Both of you are a part of me. You are both my isofons.

"Both of us? So then Asch is your isofon?"

That's right.

"But... Asch isn't a replica...is he?"

Luke was suddenly surrounded by laughter, warm and hearty, as one would expect from such a deep, penetrating voice. The redhead felt a twinge of annoyance surface in him, much like he felt when Asch or Guy would laugh at statements he made. Just great. He has the sentient whatever-it-was laughing at him, he must have really said something stupid.

I meant no offense. Lorelei seemed to have picked up on Luke's annoyance. No, Asch is not the same as you are, little one. None the less, you are both the same, you are both a part of me, and I need your help.

"You mean you need Asch's help," Luke answered, his voice betraying an overwhelming sense of disappointment. "Really, as far as you and the Score are concerned, I wasn't supposed to exist. I don't have any purpose...or any worth for that matter."

No, I ask this of you both. True, your birth was not foreseen in the Score I gave to Yulia but that is not an absolute truth. You, yourself, are proof of that. You are a great many things, but I would not deem you worthless. Unexpected, perhaps, but not unwelcome.

"You're just saying that because I'm a part of you, and you'd be insulting yourself if you said otherwise," Luke teased, his sorrow lifting a bit.

Lorelei chuckled, and the sound warmed Luke's heart. Perhaps, but perhaps you have simply yet to uncover your value. That is something even I cannot do for you. You will have to discover that on your own.
Luke took a moment to digest Lorelei’s words. "So what is it you wanted from Asch and I?" He finally inquired.

_I wish to be set free._

"You're trapped?"

_I cannot leave the core, though I long to escape its confines. Here in the core something continues to absorb my power and is causing the Sephiroth to go out of control. As long as I stay here, the core's vibrations will remain a threat to the world._

"But, what can we do? I don't even know if we can come back to the core," Luke explained. "How can we free you?"

_Later...when we have more time, I will tell you what I need of you. Do not concern yourself for now._

"Then what are you doing here?"

_I wanted to thank you for letting me speak through you, and I wanted to tell you what I told the others. I felt you deserved to know._


_Think nothing of it. Now you must go and rest. It has been far too long for you._

"But, I still have something I want to-" Before Luke could even finish his sentence, a soul draining weariness crashed over him. In spite of the questions he had for the being, Luke couldn't resist the calmness that wafted across his mind and slowly lulled him to sleep.

It was quiet here, safe and comforting. The regret and guilt that had so easily consumed him earlier was effortlessly swept away with half a thought and a fond memory of words Luke had desperately needed to hear. _Unexpected...but not unwelcome._ He still hadn't found his value or his place in this vast world... but maybe Lorelei was right, maybe there was one out there for him after all. Satisfaction washed over the young noble and he smiled in spite of himself. Here in the furthest recess of his mind, even the dead could not reach him.

And for the first time since Akzeriuth, Luke slept a dreamless sleep.
Luke shuffled in his sleep, several strands of his red hair falling into his face. But the redhead took no notice and if he had woken, he just as quickly returned to his slumber. Guy let out a sigh in disappointment; he was really hoping that Luke would wake up soon. It had been several hours now since they had escaped the core, though they'd cut it pretty close on the last leg there. But in the end Ginji had managed to get them out in the nick of time, and they were on their way back to Sheridan.

Luke hadn't woken since Lorelei or whatever it was had taken control of him, and frankly, that's what worried Guy the most. Though Asch didn't seem to be fretting, he was worried enough that he had refused to put his slumbering sibling in one of the cabins and subsequently allowed his lap to become a pillow. If he was putting up with all the shuffling around Luke kept doing, then he had to be concerned to some extent.

"Is Luke going to be okay?" Anise asked Jade, pre-empting the blond who was about to inquire the same thing.

"Asch?" Jade turned the question to the elder redhead.

"He should be okay," Asch eventually answered. "At the very least Lorelei isn't controlling him anymore. Beyond that I can't tell, we'll have to wait until he wakes up."

"Lorelei wouldn't hurt Luke..." Guy began hesitantly. "Would he?"

"I don't know..." Natalia seemed doubtful. "For being the essence of the Seventh Fonon, he certainly seemed to have a personality all his own."

"Yes," Jade agreed. "I'd say it was reminiscent of a certain someone."

"You did not just imply what I think you did," Asch said defensively, his green eyes meeting Jade's who were positively dancing.

"That depends entirely on what you think I just implied." Jade shrugged. "But to return to the issue at hand, no I do not think Lorelei had any intentions of hurting Luke or Asch. Communication was most likely his sole objective." Asch glared at Jade who'd managed to cut off any chances the redhead may have found to retort.

"Can we back up a minute?" Anise asked. "What exactly was going on down there? I mean, I know Lorelei is the sentient essence of the Seventh Fonon or whatever, but how was he possessing Luke in the first place?"

"I admit, I'm rather confused as well," Natalia conceded. "Everything happened so quickly..."

"It's like I said in the core," Jade explained. "Lorelei, Asch and Luke all share the same fonon frequency. Asch, who was born an isofon of Lorelei, and Luke who is a perfect isofon of Asch; quite unusual indeed. A pair of isofons is rare to begin with, but to have three beings who all share a fonon frequency... it's next to unheard of. Never the less, their intimate connection with Lorelei certainly explains their unquiet talents."

"But how does that allow Lorelei to control Luke?" Ion inquired.

"Though it hasn't been properly studied, it has been theorized that having an identical fonon
frequency connects two isofons through their fonslots. In a normal case, a person's fonslots allow them to gather fonons and with practice weave them into artes; but in the case of our twins over here, they would have a few additional functions. Lorelei most likely utilized this fact to control Luke's actions.

"Come on Colonel!" Anise protested. "Out with it! Stop teasing us!"

"It means we're connected through our fonslots," Asch finally provided, giving into the fact that the information was coming out either way. He appreciated Jade trying to avoid the topic for them, the flaw being in the form of an overly inquisitive dark haired girl whose prying meant it was coming out regardless. But that didn't mean he had to be happy about it.

"But what does that mean?" Anise was practically ripping her hair out. "Stop beating around the bush already!"

"To be connected through their fonslots means they are capable of passing feelings, or with enough practice thoughts, ideas, even words through their fonslots," Jade explained. "I must admit, it would make for a rather convenient communications network."

"You guys are just an endless pit of secrets, aren't you?" Anise asked with an eyebrow raised.

"You knew about this?" Tear asked.

"Of course," Asch stated as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. Jade shrugged when Tear's gaze fell on him, which for him was good enough to declare him guilty.

"Wait... so you know how Luke is feeling, right now?" Anise asked excitedly.

"Yeah, tired," Asch answered, his reply dripping with sarcasm. He seriously hoped this wasn't a forecast of what things were going to be like. They may be connected but he was not a Luke barometer.

"So that means the voice the two of you have been hearing all these years was Lorelei," Guy pondered. "Wait a second, if Lorelei could speak to you guys... does that mean you can speak to each other?"

"Woah! Hold up! You can talk to each other in your heads?!" Anise jumped to her feet from where she had been sitting on the floor. "No fair! I'm never going to able to figure out your switching game!"

"That certainly would explain a lot," Natalia confessed.

"It would," Tear admitted, watching the two redheads in question. No wonder they were so close, how much better could you understand someone if you knew, truly knew what they were feeling. Was it really any wonder Luke had become so important to Asch, someone who needed that recognition above anything else?

"Hey Ion?"

"What is it Anise?"

"That Score you were talking about in the core, how does it go again?"

"ND 2000. In Kimlasca shall be born one who inherits the power of Lorelei. He will be of royal blood with hair of red. He shall be called 'the light of the sacred flame' and he will lead Kimlasca-
Lavaldear to great prosperity," Ion recited. "Why, what's the matter Anise?"

The former Fon Master Guardian still had a puzzled look on her face as she sat back down on the ground. "What about the one with Akzeriuth?"

"ND 2018. The young scion of Lorelei's power shall bring his people to the miner's city. There, the youth will turn power to calamity and be as a weapon of Kimlasca, destroying himself and the city."

"So who's the 'Scion of Lorelei'? Luke or Asch?"


"But Luke was born in ND 2010, right? Still, Asch isn't called the light of the sacred flame," Anise pointed out.

"If that were the case, then Asch should have perished in Akzeriuth, but he's still alive as well," Natalia added.

"Luke doesn't show up in the Score at all," Asch admitted.

"That's impossible. For that to be true, the Score would have to be off-track," Tear replied.

"Exactly," Asch provided.

"That doesn't seem to concern you," Natalia noted with a twinge of annoyance. "If the Score is off-track then Kimlasca loses its prosperity."

"That might be true," Asch admitted. "But am I the only one who noticed the Score only promises prosperity for Kimlasca?"

Silence fell over everyone. A quick glance in Jade's direction told Asch that the Colonel had had the same thought. The Score really had become such a hardened fact of life that people just accepted it without question. He could understand Van's point of view, it was perfectly valid. What he refused to accept was that destroying the world was the only way for things to change.

"But what does that mean?" Anise finally asked.

"I don't think that there's only one possible future," Asch explained. "The Score tells us about just one of the infinite possibilities out there. Just because that path may not be possible doesn't mean there aren't other, better, futures out there waiting to be discovered." Asch brushed several strands of hair out of his sibling's face only to have them fall right back. Luke shuffled under his touch but quickly returned to sleep.

Asch smiled. "Futures you never even could have imagined."

Sheridan lay under the cover of clouds, though the grey entities held no threats of rain. Their somber presence, however, set an appropriate mood for the grieving city. Much to Natalia's relief, there were several people in the streets and while the energy that had once inhabited this place seemed to have died in the massacre, it was wonderful to see that so many had survived. Though none of them could quite find it in themselves to be cheerful, it was clear that life would indeed go on, and the healing could slowly begin.
Luke walked beside the Kimlascan Princess and together they were bringing up the rear. She had slowed her pace twice already to try and stay with him, but still he was steadily falling behind. Normally she'd be angry with him for not keeping up, but she certainly wasn't going to scold him this time. Though he'd slept a full day after his misadventure in the core, he was still dreadfully tired, and had been quite ill for the past couple days. Though at first they'd teased him about having Tear's mystery illness, that quickly stopped when it was looking more and more like a possibility. He wasn't quite as sick as Tear became, but it seemed to be lingering much longer. Neither she nor Tear could find any manner of injury so there was little anyone could do but hope he'd get over it soon.

Luke smiled apologetically and quickened his pace to try and keep up. Natalia couldn't resist a smile. He was unwell but still so eager not to be a burden. Really it was starting to seem like a common trend among their little grouping. It was one he certainly shared with his brother. None-the-less, he didn't have to push himself, there wasn't any rush at the moment. Though they hadn't completely resolved the issues concerning Van and the Outer Lands, there wasn't any particular sense of urgency. It wasn't like they had any particular direction yet. Everyone had wanted to return to Sheridan to discover just what the final outcome had been. Seeing the large number of Kimlascan soldiers standing guard was encouraging to say the least.

"You needn't rush," Natalia said to her cousin who was visibly trying to hurry along. "We've nowhere we need to be right now, so enjoy the chance to take it easy while you can."

"She's right," Tear agreed. "Don't push yourself too hard." Natalia giggled in spite of her best attempts to suppress it.

"What?" the melodist's eyes met her best friend's.


"How are you feeling?" Tear asked Luke, trying to distract the conversation, though it was too late to spare the pinkish hue that painted her cheeks.


"But you're not all the way yet," Natalia intervened. Luke gave her a pointed look. "Ah, ah. Don't look at me like that, I may not have a connection like you and Asch do, but I know enough to tell when you still feel sick." Luke sighed and conceded defeat.

"So where are we heading, anyways?" Natalia inquired.

"I'm not sure," Tear confessed. "Asch and Ginji have been leading the way, but I didn't think to ask them."

"Ginji wants to see if Iemon and Tamara were given proper graves," Luke provided. "After everything, it's the least we can do."

"My, that certainly can be rather convenient," Natalia replied once she realized how Luke had uncovered that information since he hadn't spoken to Asch since they had left the Albiore. "What did Jade call it? A convenient communications network? Hmm," she pondered a moment. "That seems rather long."

"Then call it the CCN!" Anise jumped in.

"That's actually not a bad idea," Tear agreed. "Unless you've been calling it something different," she added towards Luke.
The redhead shrugged. "It just kind of... is. We didn't really bother to come up with a special name for it."

"Well then, CCN it is!" Natalia declared. Luke started laughing. "What is it?"

"Asch wants to know why he doesn't get any input," Luke explained.

"Tell him that if he wants input he can walk at a decent pace like the rest of us; being here through your CCN doesn't count," Natalia teased. The redhead started laughing even harder, but he didn't continue to share whatever conversation he and Asch had gotten into.

After that the walk got much brighter, though the clouds didn't disperse and the lighting hadn't changed at all. Luke's spirits picked up and he seemed a great deal more energetic as they proceeded through Sheridan. Though whether it was because he actually felt better, or because they had called him on it was yet to be determined; but no one would deny that the increasing number of people they came across in Sheridan helped a great deal. Even Ginji, who was still trying to deal with a terrible loss seemed somewhat relieved that he hadn't lost all his friends as well.

The dead had all been properly put to rest, likely thanks to the White Knights and the Kimlascan soldiers, and graves were properly erected just beyond the city limits. Many people were to be found here, mourning the loss of friends, of parents, and of children. No one had been unaffected by the heartless slaughter. How Van could have done such a thing, was truly beyond Natalia. She just couldn't comprehend how someone would even consider such a thing, regardless of the reason.

Aschen and Tamara's graves stood among hundreds. Many of the markers were labeled, or rather, claimed, as there was no way of discerning in which grave any given person lay. A mourning family, realizing their loved one wasn't to return, simply chose at which place they would leave their respect and their prayers. Someone had already marked the two graves Ginji and the rest of them sought, and at their feet lay two bouquets of Noelle's favourite flowers.

"You're alive!" A voice greeted them from the direction of the city.

"Aston!" Ginji's eyes lit up at the sight of his companion. "You're alright!" The silver haired pilot clutched the old man in his arms, confirming for himself that this wasn't another of his dreams.

"Easy there, you're going to break some of these old ribs of mine," Aston protested. Ginji apologetically let go, but the relief was still more than visible on his face and in his posture. "I'm glad to see that nothing happened to you. When I got back to Sheridan and realized the Tartarus was gone I could only hope it was you and not that blasted Class I that had taken it. How did your mission go?"

"It was successful," Ginji answered. "Thanks to everyone and their sacrifices."

"I still can't believe that such a thing would happen." Aston shook his head in disbelief. "Poor Noelle, she was heartbroken."

"How is Noelle doing?" Ginji inquired.

"She left just over a week ago, for Grand Chokmah. Since the transmitter on our end was destroyed, I haven't been able to check up on her, but I'm sure she's doing fine."

"I'm sure she is," Asch agreed.

"So how did you escape the Oracle Knights during the attack?" Anise asked.
"I wasn't here in Sheridan at the time," Aston explained. "It was just dumb luck that I survived. It was Noelle who explained to me what had happened. Let me tell you if I ever get my hands on Class I or anyone else involved in this atrocity..."

"I don't suppose you saw our father then did you?" Luke hesitantly inquired.

"Duke Fabre came to Sheridan's aid," Jade added when Aston looked confused. "I believe these two are wondering how he fared."

"I'm sorry, there were just the Kimlascan soldiers here when I got back, I didn't see any nobility."


"Don't worry," Tear reassured her companion. "I'm sure he's just already returned home." Luke gave her a weak smile, but it was more than obvious he was still worried. They all knew first hand, Luke and Asch probably more so than any of them, just how powerful her brother could be, especially when he wasn't holding back.

"Aston," Asch spoke up. "Do you know-"

"Hey!" Aston shoved Asch aside and ran past him.

"What the-" Tear watched in disbelief as Aston began chasing after another elderly couple. But he must have had some reason because Ginji began after him.

"Don't let them get away!" Aston called back.

"What's going on?" Asch demanded.

"That's Class I," Ginji called over his shoulder.

"Well that's simple enough to deal with," Jade shrugged in a very non-chalent manner. The devious Colonel cast a small earth based arte and tripped up the old pair in the distance.

"Wow Colonel," Anise commented her hands above her eyes. "Nice range on that one."

"Shall we?" the Necromancer waved a hand invitingly in the direction that Ginji and Aston were pinning down the two members of Class I.

If one were to count Spinoza among its members, despite having parted ways with them long ago, Belkend's Class I was a mirror of Sheridan's Class M. Neither of its remaining members struggled against their capture. They seemed worn, and if they had ever possessed the same fire lemon and Tamara had, it had died out long ago. They simply lay there defeated in the dust under the weight of their captors.

Jade's spear and Asch's sword rested threateningly against their necks and allowed Ginji and Aston to stand up. "Sit up," Jade ordered and both of them did so. The blades followed them through their movements, and neither made any attempt to escape or even revealed any desire to do so. "I don't believe we've had the pleasure of an introduction."

"I'm Henken," the man said.

"I'm Cathy," the woman followed.

"You have a lot of gall showing your good for nothing faces around here!" Aston yelled. "Do you have any idea how many people died because of you?!"
"We do now," Henken replied solemnly, stealing another look at the sheer number of graves in the distance.

"Then what are you doing here?" Ginji asked, his voice unusually cold.

"Come to see what else you can swipe while no one is able to defend it?!" The last member of Class M yelled in outrage.

"No, we came to return something to you," Cathy said remorsefully. "It's in Henken's pack."

"Luke, if you would." Jade slipped around when Luke's sword replaced his spear. Normally he wouldn't ask Luke to do something of this nature, but he could tell, if only from the redhead's readiness to do as asked, that Luke knew there was no intention of actually harming Class I. The Necromancer removed the pack from Henken and after quickly investigating it for traps, passed it to Aston.

"What is it?" Ion asked.

"It's everything they stole from us," Ginji provided as Aston leafed through it.

"It's all there," Aston agreed.

"We won't ask you to forgive us, it's far beyond anything we can ever make up for. But please know that we never meant for so many people to get hurt," Cathy spoke up.

"We knew what we were doing was wrong," Henken admitted. "But we didn't know that he was going to kill anyone. We may have been rivals, but we never wished for your deaths."

"Van told us about how you were working on building dawn age technology," Cathy explained. "It would have been your 100th win, and our project wasn't done yet. He suggested we sabotage your attempts. He had to do something that would create some confusion, and we could sneak in and help ourselves to whatever we wanted. We'd reached a roadblock in our work, we thought that if we stole your plans we could find new angles to approach. I swear we didn't know he was going to kill anyone much less so many..."

"I believe they're being sincere," Ion spoke up.

"Sincere or not, it does not excuse them of their actions," Jade pointed out.

"Then what would you do with them?" the Fon Master replied, a surprising level of severity in his tone. Ion was no stranger to death, but after all that had happened, even he didn't know if he could take any more of it. Especially if it was just as unnecessary as the massacre in Sheridan had been.

"The research Van has you doing, it involves fomicry, correct?" Jade directed his question at Class I.

"Yes, that's right." Henken confirmed. "He had us working on effective methods of stabilizing very large replicas, as well as more efficient means of collecting large amounts of replica data. But how did-"

"What was the maximum potential size you found in your research?"

"Well it could easily replace the lands that have disappeared," Cathy provided. "But it's never been tested to its full extent."
"That's irrelevant," Jade dismissed her. "What's the theoretical maximum?"

"Theoretically... larger than anything that would fit on this world," Henken provided.

"Then Van's already able to create the size he needs," Asch realized where Jade was going. "I'd be curious to know where he's getting the necessary materials and supply of Seventh fonons from."

"Lorelei did say something was absorbing his power," Luke pointed out.

"Which means he's well underway with whatever he has going," Guy concluded. "That's just great."

"It's all going to come down to the wire," Ion realized.

"What do you want us to do with these two?" Asch asked.

"Let them go," Ginji decided. "I'm not going to stoop to Van's level and kill people who may be a hindrance to us."

"But what if they go back and help the Commandant with his research?" Anise asked.

"From what I've heard there isn't much left to do," Jade spoke up. "The damage has been done, as it were. There likely isn't much left that Van needs them for."

"Believe me, we'll have nothing more to do with that man!" Cathy protested.

"Even if he threatens you with your life?" Jade inquired.

"After this our lives are forfeit anyways," Henken replied, unable to look anyone in the eye.

"You're wrong," Ginji stated coldly. "You can't just go and die after what happened. That's nothing more than copping out of the responsibility. You have to make up for everyone who died."

"He's right, Henken," Cathy admitted.

"Schooled by a Class M youngster..." Henken sighed. "I never thought I'd see the day," Luke and Asch both removed their swords and Class I stood up. "If you'll let us, we'd like to help with some of the repairs that need to be done," the man offered.

"I know for a fact we destroyed several of your fon machines, and I'm sure the Oracle Knights did their share of damage as well," Cathy pointed out. "Let us help you rebuild them as a start."

"I don't know..." Aston grumbled.

"Let them help," Ginji nudged the older man. "You need all the hands you can get."

"And it would likely be for the best if they remain away from Belkend for awhile," Ion pointed out.

"Thank you," Cathy and Henken both bowed their heads in gratitude. "We'll give you everything we've got left in us!"

"I'm glad they could work things out," Luke admitted.

"Yes, I am as well," Ion agreed. "The last thing this city needs is more bloodshed."

"Aston," Asch interrupted as the man was about to walk off with Class I.
"What is it?"

"Do you know whereabouts Spinoza is?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't. But it's possible he returned to Baticul with the soldiers."

"Thanks," Asch replied. Aston gave the redhead a strange look before dismissing him and returning to the city.

"Why would Spinoza go to Baticul?" Anise asked.

"He likely returned with Duke Fabre since he was also one of Van's targets," Jade pointed out.

"Yeah, and he does research for our family," Asch added. "That's probably how Father knew what was going on in Sheridan. Spinoza reports his research to us, and if Van was trying to threaten him, he could have let Father know."

"I'm glad he did," Luke conceded. "Or things could be a lot worse right now."

"So what's our plan of action?" Guy asked. "We've got the core stabilized, but what now?"

"We lower the lands properly before they drop on their own," Jade provided.

"If the lands just fell, lots and lots of people would die!" Mieu pitched in. "That would be really bad, mieuuu."

"We won't let that happen, now will we?" Luke asked, too tired to bother prodding the cheagle for bouncing on his head. But for some reason he decided to indulge the thing. He must really need some sleep.

"No we won't!" Mieu happily agreed.

"Unfortunately we have no idea where the last passage rings are located," Jade pointed out.

"I'm afraid I can't be of any assistance there," Ion replied.

"I'll see if I can get Noir to find out for us," Asch suggested. "But she's going to need some time."

"While we're on that topic..." Guy jumped on the opportunity to ask the question that had been bothering him for awhile now. "How exactly did you get the Dark Wings working for you?"

"Better yet, how long have they been working for you?" Anise inquired.

"Since Chesedonia," Luke realized. "The very first time we were there, when they tried to steal our wallets, you snuck out that night."

"That's right," Asch confirmed. He looked worn, sort of tired and indifferent which was most likely the reason he was providing such easy answers. As much as Luke had tried to keep it to himself, the weariness he felt had slipped across to his sibling. Both of them were overdue for some rest, and had hit the point where they just didn't have the energy to hide it anymore.

"Why hire bandits though?" Anise inquired.

"Because they aren't just bandits. At the very least, you should know what I mean," Asch said with a look in Guy's direction.
"I admit they look familiar," Guy conceded. "But I haven't been able to place them."

"The circus troupe, the Black Dream," Asch provided.

"Wait, you mean the one that we went to see as children?" Natalia inquired.

"That's right, you were there too, weren't you?"

"Yes, it seems so few troupes come all the way out to Baticul since there's so much local entertainment and the Colosseum. Most prefer to remain in the Chesedonia area."

"Yeah, but either way, The Dark Wings and The Black Dream are both just covers for Noir's real operation."

"And what's that?" Ion asked.

"Hod," Asch said simply. "She took in people who had lost their homes and their families when Hod fell and Feres Isle was destroyed. Both operations are a way for them to earn the money they need to survive."

"Hmmm," Jade pondered.

"Explains things?" Asch asked.

"Well it's always been a bit of a mystery as to why the Dark Wings' activity came and went, but I guess it depended on how well their troupe would be doing."

"Yeah," Asch confirmed.

"So, the Dark Wings are going to gather information for us," Tear spoke up, "but what will we do in the meantime?"

"If possible, I'd like to go back to Baticul," Asch suggested. "There we can find out how negotiations for the peace treaty went while we wait, and I can contact Noir from there."

"I've no problems with that," Jade shrugged.

"Well we could go to Grand Chokmah as well," Natalia suggested. "Jade hasn't been home in awhile either."

"You needn't worry about me," Jade said with a smirk. "Though really I am honored." Natalia scowled and rolled her eyes. She should have known concern for the Colonel would be sent astray.

"To Baticul then," Guy said with a nod.


Baticul was as full of people as it ever was and the hustle seemed strange having come from the solemn atmosphere in Sheridan. Nothing seemed amiss in the capital as the citizens hurried about their daily business, which bode well for the state of world affairs. At times like these it was so hard to believe what a dire situation the world was in, when everything just seemed so normal.

But on the subject of normal, much to everyone's relief, Luke and Asch were both back to normal.
Though Asch still seemed weary at times, Natalia suspected that would linger until Van was finally dealt with and things properly settled down. Luke was no longer ill and between her and the younger redhead they were doing their best to keep Asch's worries in check. The presence of the connection between her cousin and her fiancé was especially useful and for such a peculiar thing, its existence quickly filed itself under normal daily occurrences. Knowing it was there made their silent interactions seem so obvious, and everyone wondered why they'd never suspected anything. Yet, how could anyone suspect something so farfetched? It seemed more like the sort of thing one read about in storybooks.

The sight of the castle brought a great deal of relief to the young princess, much unlike the last time they'd arrived. She had been filled with such dread at that time, worried about her father's reaction and that he may reject her. She should have had more faith in him; she should have had more faith in herself. But there was little she could do to correct the past, all she could do was build a proper future, and that was something she had every intention of doing.

"Princess Natalia!" One of the guards greeted her at the gates, which, much to her surprise, were closed. That was strange, the gates shouldn't be closed until after dark. "I'm glad to see you've returned!"

"I'm glad to return as well, my friends and I wish to speak with Father, could you open the gates for us?"

"I'm afraid that isn't possible. His Highness is currently away and has restricted access to the castle during his absence. I can allow you to enter, as well as any members of the Fabre family, but all others will have to wait until His Highness returns."

"Those seem like strange orders for Father to issue," Natalia pondered.

"I bet he's worried about Mohs," Luke suggested. "He may have booted Mohs out, but there could still be people Mohs influenced hanging around."

"A valid point," Jade agreed. "That could very well be the case. At any rate, we know that the peace negotiations must still be ongoing, or at the very least the rulers have yet to return home."

"But it also means they began in the first place, and that's a very good thing," Ion pointed out.

"With both countries eager and willing, it certainly simplifies the process somewhat," the Colonel added.

"Van will throw himself off the roof of Daath's cathedral before anything ever simplifies politics," Asch snidely remarked.

"If only we were that lucky." Jade pushed his glasses back up his nose.

"I guess we'll have to wait it out at the manor." Luke shrugged. He had made it a point long ago to never try and grasp the concept of politics. Though he'd learned a great deal from their travels and dealing with Peony and his Uncle, he doubted he'd ever understand it enough to do the sort of things Asch had to do.

"What of you, Princess?" The guard inquired.

"I'll stay at Aunt Suzanne's as well. Please inform me when my father returns."

"I will pass word along to send you a message as soon as he arrives!"
"Thank you," Natalia nodded and the guard bowed before returning to his post.

"You'll get to see if your father's alright," Guy nudged Luke who seemed to have lost himself in thought during the process of walking towards the manor.

"Yeah, I really hope he's okay," Luke said. The blond fell silent, his intense gaze shifting to the ground. "Oh Guy, I'm sorry." Luke exclaimed as the reason for Guy's silence finally clicked.

"Don't be," Guy said after a moment. "I hope he's okay too."

No one had any qualms about staying at the manor, and Lady Suzanne's reception when she realized her boys were home was nothing short of what Guy had come to expect from her. His feelings regarding the Fabre family aside, he had a great deal of respect for the Lady of the house. How could he not? Especially after the way she'd come to his defense when he was younger. Let's face it, a childhood as a noble hardly prepared one for the tasks required of a young servant. But Suzanne had always been patient with him, as she was with everyone, and often dismissed punishments the senior staff had issued. Suzanne had such an open mind and a warm heart, no one he knew could find it in them to hate her. He certainly hadn't, just as he never could bring himself to hate Luke. That kind smile of theirs made it utterly impossible.

But as she eagerly greeted everyone, something seemed amiss. There was something different in the entryway where everyone was happily chatting and Guy couldn't put his finger on it. Instinctively Guy found himself running his fingers along the hilt of his sword, as his eyes made their way up the pillar where it once hung.

So that was what seemed odd. So many years he had stood here, staring at the blade that now rested in his sheath, vowing revenge against the people that had stolen it. But he had been defeated by them, by the two redheads who had destroyed his hatred with their trust and their kindness. Each in their own way, they'd destroyed the chains that bound to him to his past; the very same chains that he could still see strangling the people who were once his closest friends. If only Van and Cantabile could see that. In their attempts to escape those chains, they were destroying everything around them. But in the end, they would still be bound, even if there was nothing left to the world but them and the memories they couldn't let go of.

On the pillar hung a different sword.

Guy clutched his own even tighter. Though he had vowed to put his hatred behind him, he couldn't help but wonder.

*Who had to die for that one?*

"I think it's pretty," Luke said, scaring Guy from the thoughts he'd become lost in. The blond suddenly noticed the two of them were the only ones left in the room.

"They say a blade grows more beautiful the more blood it spills," Guy commented, his voice coming across colder than he'd intended. Damn it! Why was he being this way... with Luke of all people?

"You're probably right, a lot of people died for that sword up there."

"I think it's a poor choice of a trophy, but that might just be me."

"But it's not a trophy," Luke shook his head, and Guy found himself face to face with that same warm smile that had melted away his hatred all those years ago.
"Really? Then what is it supposed to be?"

"It's a reminder."

"A... reminder?"

"I asked Father about it last time, because it bothered me. I didn't know why he would want to show off your family sword the way he had, but it wasn't about showing it off at all. It hung there all those years as a reminder to him, of the people he'd killed, and of the fact that he still had to live for all those lives he took defending the people he cared about. That sword there, that was the sword he used in the battle of Hod."

Guy turned to look up at the pillar, the jeweled blade still hung there glistening in the afternoon sun. All these years... his sword had been a reminder to them both. One of all he'd lost, the other of all he'd destroyed. What would he have done if he'd actually gone through with all his twisted ideas? But maybe this was a testament to the fact that there are always two stories, and things change when you find yourself on the other side. Hod... Akzeriuth... so many lives had been lost, and history had a nasty habit of repeating itself regardless of the victims along the way. Both those that died, and those who did the killing, none ever escaped unharmed. But one thing Guy knew for sure: as long as he was breathing he wasn't going to let Van make the same mistake. No more lives thrown away for pointless causes, or any causes of that matter. It just wasn't worth it.

"How is your father doing?" Guy finally asked.

"Mother said he's up at the castle being seen by one of the doctors but otherwise he's fine."

"I'm glad to hear that," Guy replied, and for the first time in his life, he meant it. "I think I owe him something."

"Really? What's that?"

"An apology."

"What for?"

"For everything, and for nothing all at the same time."


Guy laughed and ruffled Luke's hair in spite of the redhead's protests. For the first time in a very long time, Guy could look at the paths he had chosen, and had absolutely no regrets.

"Are you sure about this, honey?" Noir held up the bag she'd just received from her current employ. The pale moonlight was partially hidden by drifting clouds making the empty street a safer meeting ground for the bandit and the young noble than it otherwise should have been. "This is more than we agreed on."

"Think of it as a bonus," Asch replied, several pieces of parchment he'd just received from the woman securely in his grip. "You did save my life."

"For a bonus like this, I may have to make saving your life a habit of mine." Noir winked and Asch rolled his eyes, unable to resist a chuckle at the bandit's tactics. Some things never changed.
Asch let out a sigh and his face grew serious. "I really am grateful for everything you've done. You guys really helped me out a lot."

Noir cocked her head, giving Asch a curious look. She knew finality when she saw it, and that was definitely a prime example. "Are you... firing us?"

"Things are going to get rough," Asch explained. Noir raised an eyebrow. "Rough-er," Asch corrected himself. "You can't risk your life in our skirmish, don't you have your own people to look after?"

"That may be true sweetie, but just because you have to look out for the lives of others, doesn't mean you can stop living yourself."

"It's not always that easy," Asch replied solemnly.

"Of course it isn't easy, but no one can live solely for others," Noir pointed out.

"What about you? It seems like everything you do is all to help your people."

"Oh I know how to have fun every once in awhile," the pink haired bandit ran her finger up Asch's chin. "I can show you sometime if you like."

"How did I know you'd say that?" Asch rolled his eyes again, a grin spreading across his face.

"Because we're friends, and I like you sweetie. If you ever need our help again, you know how to find us," Noir slipped into a nearby alley. She popped her head of pink hair back out to give Asch one last wink. "And I hope you do."

Asch stood alone in the deserted city street, watching the leader of the Dark Wings slip into the night.

"Living for yourself, huh?" Asch spoke into the night before turning to return to his own home.

"I'll try to remember that."

Time passed quickly at the Fabre manor, much like it always did any time they were there. It had been over a week before the King had returned and brought news of the peace treaty's success. Ginji had been overjoyed to see Noelle again and the perky young pilot seemed to be fairing as well as could be expected given recent events. But for now the two of them were relaxing back at the manor, and Tear found herself along with everyone else standing outside the castle's library.

Unlike previous visits, their meeting with King Ingobert was completely informal and they had all sat down in the library discussing the treaty and recent events. Asch and Natalia had been there the day before for the formal briefing and had met up with the rest of them in the library that morning. It had been quite a lively discussion. Tear was surprised just how much had been discussed at the meeting, not the least of which included the war on Hod 15 years ago, and what position to take concerning her brother. Both had agreed to issue formal complaints against Daath, and while everyone knew that it likely wouldn't go anywhere, the added pressure was something they felt to be necessary. If nothing else it would keep Mohs at a more weary distance.

His Highness also recounted the discussion of Hod, and it had been a touchy subject; Guy being the most bothered by it all, and to no one's surprise Jade being the least. Tear found herself
wondering if the Colonel had any part in what went on. He would have been the right age, but she
couldn't bring herself to ask him such a personal question. For her, the story was simply a means
that confirmed what she had known for awhile now. Van had told her the same story. He had been
forced to destroy Hod's passage ring, just as he had forced Luke to destroy Akzeriuth's.

Tear took a deep breath and forced herself to settle some of those feelings. She wasn't going to
blindly hate fomicry, blindly hate Luke, because that was what Van wanted, and it was the exact
same thing of which she was condemning her brother. He hated the Score blindly, and because of
that, he refused to consider any alternatives. In the end, he was the real slave to Yulia's Score. But
she would stop him, no matter what the cost. It was the last thing she could do as his sister.

The melodist tugged at the short jacket she was wearing, and found herself fidgeting with the
sleeves. After spending so long in her uniform, it felt so unnatural to be wearing something else,
and something that was so unlike what she had become accustomed to wearing.

Just the other day, Suzanne had kidnapped the girls and all four of them had gone shopping. Anise
had been having difficulty repairing some of the holes in her uniform the night before, and since
she no longer held a position in the Order, she didn't have any way of replacing the tattered ones
she currently held. So Suzanne had made it her mission to find Anise something she could wear
and managed to drag Tear into it as well. Tear had adamantly refused the Lady's offers but... well,
she found where Luke and Asch got their stubbornness from.

"You don't need to fidget," Luke commented, noticing the melodist's discomfort. "I think it looks
really good on you."

"Th-Thank you." Tear managed.

"Hey! What about me?!" Anise protested teasingly, her hands on her hips.

"I think you look quite lovely as well," Ion commented with a smile. Anise's face instantly turned
bright red. "You really should leave your hair down more often."

"If I leave it down it gets tangled in Tokunaga," Anise managed. "...but...if you like it..." Anise
mumbled inaudibly and everyone except Ion laughed, leaving a rather confused Fon Master out on
the joke. Asch just shook his head. He'd figure it out someday. He was almost as bad as Luke and
Tear were.

"So are we going to return to the manor?" Tear inquired.

"No," Asch spoke up, his gaze fixed on the melodist. "We're here at the castle; you're going to see
a doctor."

"Thought we'd forgotten about your episode in Keterburg hadn't you?" Jade said slyly.

"Well no but..."

"There are no urgent matters to attend to at the moment and we've nothing else planned for the
remainder of the day," Jade said. "You've no excuses."

"But... I wouldn't want to trouble the doctors here-"

"Really, Tear, it's no trouble at all," Natalia cut her off. "The doctors here have so few patients they
actually tend to, they'd probably enjoy having something to do."

"They've got you trapped this time," Guy shrugged when Tear looked around for help. "Besides,
I'm with them. You had us all really worried in Keterburg, and if it gets any worse you could be in some serious trouble. Just go along with things this time. Right, Luke?"

"Luke?" Guy turned around to find his best friend missing.

"Hey, where did boy wonder and his replica go?" Anise asked, but shrunk back under the assault of glares she got from the group. "What?"

"If you would kindly keep that quiet," Natalia replied. "Not everyone here at the castle is aware of Luke's circumstances."

"Oh, sorry. But where did they go?"

"Who knows," Jade shrugged. "But we're in Baticul and the castle poses little threat to either of them. Let them do as they please."

"You do so know where they went," Anise accused.

"Perhaps, but that doesn't change where we're heading," Jade replied with an expectant look in Tear's direction.

"I know, I'll come," Tear conceded defeat.

"Now, Natalia, if you'd show us to the medical wing?"

"Of course, this way."

"What's taking so long in there?" Anise asked, giving the closed door the most frustrated look she could muster.

"The same thing that was taking so long when you asked 5 minutes ago," Guy provided with his own level of frustration, except his feelings were directed more towards a certain dark haired girl in their company.

"But she's been in there forever!" Anise whined.

"If the doctor had to do any tests, it may take some time to get the results back," Jade explained. "Come now Anise, patience is such a valuable virtue."

"Shut up Colonel."

"Having fun?" A voice came from down the hallway.

"Luke, Asch! Where did you two take off to?" Anise demanded.

"We had some personal stuff to do," Luke provided as Asch grumbled inaudibly. Whatever they had done, Asch hadn't been happy about it.

"I see you managed to locate Spinoza," Jade commented, directing his attention to the man standing behind the twins.

"Yes, they've told me the news, I'm glad to hear that the mission to the core was a success," Spinoza provided.
"Yes, indeed, in spite of a few, shall we say, *interferences.*"

"I've heard," Spinoza nodded confirming something unspoken that had passed between the two of them.

But before anyone could ask them to clarify, the door to the doctor's office opened and the blue haired doctor invited them in.

"Tear, how are you doing?" Luke asked.

"I've gotten the results of the tests back," the doctor said matter-of-factly. "I felt it was important to explain this to you - her friends- and Tear has agreed to this."

"Are you sure Tear?" Natalia asked. "We're concerned for your health, but your condition is truly none of our business."

"No, it's alright, you're the one who made me come, you deserve to at least hear the results." Tear nodded at the doctor to continue. She didn't need to ponder on it, the way the doctor was looking at her already told her that whatever she had to say, wasn't good.

"Tear's blood fonons are showing some extremely unstable values," the doctor explained. "According to the tests I've done, she has accumulated an abnormally large number of Seventh Fonons in her body."

"What's wrong with that?" Natalia asked. "I would think it normal to find Seventh Fonons in the body of a Seventh Fonist."

"That's correct," the doctor continued. "But the fonons are contaminated by the miasma, which is preventing them from properly exiting her body. This is causing a build up of miasma within her which is weakening her internal organs and that is likely the cause of her symptoms."

"But where are these contaminated fonons coming from?" Ion asked. "We've all traveled together for a great deal of time, but Tear is the only one affected."

"That's not entirely true..." Spinoza began but cut himself off after a harsh glare from Asch.

"Tear has absorbed over 100 times what any normal Seventh Fonist would absorb in her lifetime," the doctor added.

"The passage rings," Jade concluded. "Contaminated Seventh Fonons from the core are passed up through the Sephiroth. Tear has been exposed because she has been operating the passage rings."

"But what will happen if these fonons keep building up in her body?" Luke asked, his voice betraying just how upset he was.

"Right now, Tear's condition is relatively stable," The doctor provided. "We can give her medication to slow the progression and relieve her symptoms, but if her level of contamination increases, she will eventually die."

Everyone fell silent.

"You're both affected as well, aren't you?" Jade deduced, with a look at the twins.

"Why would you think that?" Asch asked, the snide tone in his voice giving away his defensiveness.
"Don't think you can hide things from me," Jade shot back. "You operated the passage ring in the Meggiora Highlands. As for Luke, an extremely large number of Seventh Fonons from the core would have entered his body when he was possessed by Lorelei, and with your fon slots aligned as they are, it's not beyond reason to assume that some of those fonons would have passed into your body as well."

"And yet, given those facts, neither of them are showing nearly as much damage as would be expected," Spinoza jumped in, looking up from the papers he'd received from the other doctor that described Tear's results. Jade nodded at the man to continue. "Asch was concerned about the effects Lorelei might of had on Luke and I checked up on both of them. Though they both have some level of contamination, it's nothing that will endanger their health. I have no idea why, my only guess is that their fonon frequency is somehow protective."

"It may also be that Lorelei has managed to remain relatively uncontaminated by the miasma in the core," Jade suggested. "Either way, as long as their health isn't an immediate concern, then we have more pressing matters," Jade returned his attention to Tear.

"Maybe that's why Lorelei is trying to escape the core," Tear said. "Perhaps if he stays there, he risks becoming contaminated."

"It's certainly a possibility," Jade agreed.

"Do we know where the remaining passage rings are?" The melodist inquired.

"Stop..." Luke said, his voice practically quivering. "Stop acting like everything is normal! You can't possibly be thinking of continuing to operate the passage rings! Didn't you hear the doctor, you could die!"

"Then what would you suggest we do?" Tear shot back coldly. "Even though we've stabilized the core, the Sephiroth are already at their limit. If we don't lower the lands, there will be countless innocent people that will get hurt, or even die. After all the work King Ingobert and Emperor Peony have done and the way they've agreed to help, you're going to ask everyone to stop now? I would have thought better of you."

"I'm not saying we stop!" Luke argued, now visibly shaken by the response he'd gotten from Tear. "I can operate the passage rings. Asch has his hyperresonance, there's no need for you to get any sicker."

"That would be pointless," Tear argued.

"Luke if you did that then you'd be the one to get sick," Anise pointed out.

"There's no point in having two people getting sick if they don't have to," the melodist said. "Don't go nobly sacrificing yourself for nothing."

"Damn it, this isn't a game of logic!" Luke cried out in frustration. "We're talking about your life!"

"Luke," Jade placed his hand on the young noble's shoulder. "Your sentiments are appreciated, but I'm afraid in this case is Tear is correct. We simply don't have any alternate options at this point."

The redhead looked at the Colonel, his shining emerald eyes pleading. Jade had an answer, he always had an answer; but Jade simply shook his head.

"Asch, did you find out where the last Sephiroth are?" Tear asked again.

"Yeah, there's one in Tataroo Valley, and the other is in Daath," Asch provided, keeping his voice
as calm as possible. The tension in the room was unbelievably high and it would take nothing to set them all off.

"Let's save Daath for last," Guy suggested. "There's no telling what kind of trouble is waiting for us there."

"Tataroo Valley it is then," Jade agreed.

"If you could..." Tear began. "Could you leave me for awhile?"

"Of course," Guy replied with a compassionate smile. No one, including the doctors, wasted any time escaping the room's confines.

Tear sat on the bed, the afternoon's sun streaming in the window and landing on her back. She stared at the floor, unsure exactly what she was feeling. It was such a mixture of emotions, and the reality of exactly what had just gone on not quite sinking in. But there wasn't any other choice, and this was her responsibility. No one else was going to pay the price to stop her brother.

"Luke," Tear noticed the redhead still standing there, staring at her. She looked away again, she couldn't take the hurt look he was giving her. "Please go."

"No," Luke refused. "You know, it's okay to show how you're feeling. No one is going to think any less of you if you show some emotion. Having feelings isn't a weakness!"

"Luke please!" Tear's voice broke, and even Luke could tell she was trying not to cry. "I... I don't want you to see me like this."

Tear felt a wave of relief when she heard Luke's footsteps, but rather than make their way to the door, Luke came around the other side of the bed and sat down. He leaned gently against her back, providing a comforting weight and surprising amount of warmth.

"Then I won't look," Luke said softly. He set his hand gently down over Tear's and was more than surprised when rather than push him away, she clutched his hand in return.

"You're... such an idiot."
The darkened, frigid sky was broken by the scrawling light of the Planet Storm. Unimaginable numbers of fonons gathered here, returning to the core only to be sent back into the world through this gate's twin. It wasn't Van's first visit to the Absorption Gate, but the sheer power of what Yulia created never failed to instill some degree of respect in him. Though she'd knowingly sent the world on a path to destruction, and could be held responsible for more deaths than anyone could begin to fathom, he at least had to respect the fact that she'd known how to go about doing it. But he would surpass her legend and fix her blunders, even if it cost him his life.

On the topic of blunders, he could file his efforts in Sheridan under such a heading. He had been foolish, distracted, and underestimated the man who had challenged him. Oh how he had longed to see Duke Fabre writhe under his blade ever since the slaughter he had wrought on Hod. He'd never forget what he saw happen to the family he'd sworn to protect before being hauled off by researchers. Though his personal revenge had fallen in the light of more important matters, he couldn't say he wouldn't take up the opportunity should it present itself. And it had been handed to him on a platter, but he had failed. It didn't matter though, they would all be gone when the lands fell. Those that didn't perish in the crash could experience exactly what Hod had as it sunk in the miasma, with no one bothering to come to their rescue.

Still, his loss to Duke Fabre bothered him. Not only had he been defeated in front of his men, but it had turned the entire mission in Sheridan into a failure. There was a good chance that Asch and his band of fools had succeeded in stabilizing the core. He hadn't anticipated such a bold action on their part and it was proving to be problematic. But he would cut such foolishness short. There would be no more of these childish games his student and his sister were playing.

There were only two places left where they could interfere, and regardless of where they went, they would be met and they would be stopped. If he had to chain Asch down and force his cooperation he would and at this point he no longer cared what methods that entailed. Anyone could be forced to do something they'd never dream of doing, it was simply a matter of finding the means of persuading them. He had worked too hard to reach this point and he wasn't going to let it all slip away now.

Regardless of what he had to do, he would see the birth of a world free of Yulia's curse. Those that would not aid him could die with the others.

Seeing Tataroo Valley in the daylight made it seem like a completely different place. Then again, so much had happened since he and Tear had been swept away from the manor. It was so hard to believe; that felt like a lifetime ago. The trees in whose shadows monsters once dwelt were now brilliant shades of green and the sunlight danced off the river he and Tear had followed down to the road. Though this time he found himself making his way up the other side of the rushing water, Luke still recognized much of the scenery from his first visit.

The sound of a waterfall in the distance was appeasing and brought Luke back to that night so many months ago. Back when all he ever did was follow along, whether it be Tear's lead or Asch's, he had been so helpless on his own. But that was before Akzeriuth, before the world known as reality had come crashing down on him and Luke had very painfully learnt to understand the concept of the consequences of one's choices. It left the young noble with very mixed feelings. He had always thought he'd give anything if he could go back to the days before Akzeriuth was
destroyed, but now he wasn't so sure. Was everything he'd gained since then, all the bonds he'd made, all the people he'd met really worth the sacrifice? They should be, if it meant Luke could bring back the thousands that he had killed... but now... he didn't think he'd be able to do it.

"It feels strange to be back here, doesn't it?" Tear asked, drawing Luke from his thoughts.

"It does," Luke agreed. "It seems so different, but nothing's really changed."

"A lot has happened since then," Tear chuckled. "I remember what you were like back then, it's like remembering a completely different person. I'm glad I took the time to get to know you."

"I guess you're right," Luke thought on it. He'd been so confused and unsure how to act back then, maybe it was no surprise he'd come off differently.

"You've grown a lot since then too," Tear added.

"You really think so?"

Tear smiled in reassurance but didn't offer an answer. Her expression sent a wave a joy washing over the young noble. But as quickly as that happiness had come, it was replaced by doubt that prodded him from the back of his mind. He hadn't wanted to push the issue but... he had to know.

"Tear..." Luke hesitantly began, and Tear looked worried by the serious expression that had dawned on her companion. "What you said back on Mt. Roneal, about how my being a replica doesn't matter, did you really mean that?"

The melodist contemplated the question for awhile and the two of them walked along in silence.

"I don't know... I just don't..." Tear explained, the sound of the Albiore's engines made her voice barely audible. "It was so much easier before. I lost my brother, my teachers, the people I once respected... but at the same time, I look at them and think of what the world gained, what I gained, from having Luke around, and I don't know anymore. I don't know what I'm supposed to believe."

"I think you do know," Guy answered softly. "You just haven't realized it yet. And when you realize it, you'll know exactly what you have to do."

"I did," she finally answered.

"But... you hate fomicry and replicas, and everything that goes along with it," Luke continued.

"That's right, and at a time I would have wished that it never existed at all. But looking at you, at the way that you live, and just trying to imagine what Asch's life would have been like without you... what my life would have been like without you... I just can't. All I had known was all the horrible things fomicry had done. You helped me to see the good too. So I can't just hate fomicry; and I don't hate you. I can't accept what my brother is trying to do, but none of that is your fault."

Luke smiled, but he couldn't find the words to reply; and yet, as the melodist returned the expression, no words were needed. Even though she couldn't tell what was going through his mind, she could see the burden that had been lifted from his shoulders. It made her happy, but at the same time, a small tendril of guilt settled within her stomach. She regretted the things she had said, and all the pain she must have put him through. There wasn't anything she could do about it now, but
she would find a way to make it up to him in whatever time she had left.

"Master! Master!" Mieu came bouncing down the path and scrambled up onto the redhead's shoulder. "Look, look we're almost at the very top!"

Luke looked up and saw that the little cheagle was right and the steeper trails they had been climbing were coming to an end. Both he and Tear hurried ahead to catch up with the group from which they'd fallen behind while talking. Jade eyed them both once they'd caught up, a mischievous light dancing in his eyes. Tear's cheeks flushed and Luke wondered how he could imply so much without saying a word.

The younger redhead couldn't deny he was looking forward to getting to the top. While he knew it wasn't the same field of selenias in which he and Tear had awoken, he still looked forward to the view. He may have seen the ocean plenty of times, but that particular memory stood out. After all, it had been the first time he'd really seen the world.

'What has you so excited?' Asch finally inquired. There was a hint of annoyance in his tone. Luke couldn't say he could relate since Asch really never got all that excited, but he could imagine what having a bouncing seven year old in your head must be like. He tried to tone it down a bit.

'I want to see the view from the top,' Luke answered. He could feel Asch roll his eyes. That reaction was short lived; a sudden seriousness and alertness crashed over his sibling. 'What's the matter?' Luke picked up his pace as did everyone around him.

'Well, it doesn't look like you're going to get to enjoy that view,' Asch answered.

"Looks like we win," the first of two figures said, a cocky grin quickly dawning her face. "Such a pity, Sync was so looking forward to killing you, Necromancer."

"Major Cantabile! Major Legretta!" Tear exclaimed in surprise. She knew that their efforts probably wouldn't go unhindered, but she hadn't expected to meet both her teachers here.

"My, my. Cantabile and Legretta the Quick." Jade quickly materialized his spear. "I see we've gone up in rank."

"Don't flatter yourself," Legretta replied, shooting a disproving look at her companion before giving her opponents her undivided attention.

"I don't suppose there's any chance you'll let us pass quietly?" Jade asked.

"Nope, none." Cantabile shrugged.

"You've caused enough trouble for the Commandant," Legretta said. "It's time you were lain in your graves." The God-General raised her guns, and Cantabile followed suit, drawing her own sword.

"Sorry, but we can't let that happen," Guy spoke up, readying his own weapon. "We won't let you destroy this world."

"This world is already doomed Gailardia," Cantabile stated. "Just as Hod was doomed the moment people chose the Score over their lives, there isn't any hope left for these people."

"You're wrong!" Luke protested. "People can change, they can learn to do things differently. Nothing is set in stone!"
"Tell people all you'd like, they'll never change their ways," Legretta argued. "You could tell the world the Score will be their downfall, but they won't believe you. People are weak, unable to stand on their own without the support of the Score."

"And you think that this is the answer?" Natalia demanded. "Destroy the world and start anew?"

"Sure it is," Cantabile answered. "The people of the new world won't know anything about the Score. They'll be able to live normal lives, as people were supposed to!"

"Don't you get it?" Guy's sword met Cantabile's, taking the first blow. Around them, battle quickly erupted. "You're doing the exact same thing that was done to Hod. Weed out those you don't see as worthy to exist. Whether it's because they follow the Score or the Score says they'll die, it's all the same!"

"It's not! Hod was slaughtered for no reason, no purpose. This sacrifice is for our future!" The God-General threw the blond back and Tear hastened to heal his injuries before Cantabile's ensuing assault. "I'm not going to sit back and watch the world end because the Score says so!"

"What are you talking about?" Anise yelled. "The Score doesn't say the world's gonna end! Besides, the Score is already off-track!"

"The Score is stronger than a few petty disturbances," Legretta argued, several of her bullets landing in Tokunaga. "History will proceed as the Seventh Fonstone says."

"The Seventh Fonstone?" Tear spoke up. "Has Van found it?"

"No wait, I remember now," Guy interrupted, doing his best to fend off Cantabile's attack with Natalia's help. His familiarity with her style made it easier to follow her movements, leaving more of them free to keep an eye on Legretta and her guns. "When we were in the core, I saw it! The Seventh Fonstone."

"That fonstone?" Luke asked, the particular stone Guy was referring to coming to mind. "How do you know that was the Seventh Fonstone?"

"It used to be on Hod," Cantabile provided for them.

"Really?" Jade said sceptically. "That's the first I've heard of that."

"Fende was one of the seven Sages that served Yulia, and his family was charged with the protection of the Seventh Fonstone. Of course no one would have known it was there!" Cantabile argued back.

"But Van brought us down there once," Guy explained. "It makes sense that it would have sunk down into the core after Hod's fall!" Guy's thoughts were interrupted by Cantabile's renewed attack. Even with Natalia trying to distract her, he was starting to become overwhelmed.

Luke then made the mistake of trying to come to his best friend's aid, and before he knew exactly what had happened, he'd drawn the violet haired woman's fury. Her attack on the young noble was twice as fierce as the assault she'd mounted against Guy and each of her blows were meant to be fatal. Luke was already struggling to keep up with her speed and was becoming more and more shaken by the attack. He'd never faced down such an intense hatred before.

Across the clearing Asch had his hands full with the blonde God-General. None-the-less, a small part of his mind stayed focused on his struggling sibling. Jade had turned his attention towards Cantabile and was helping Luke stay afloat. Though Cantabile was proving to be exceptionally
skilled at dodging artes, she was taking some residual damage. Asch stole a glance over his shoulder to see how the situation was going. The evil smile on Legretta's face when he looked back instantly made him regret his decision.

Cantabile's attacks were relentless, and she showed no signs of slowing down. She had absolutely no intention of slowing down either. Not when she had the younger Fabre brat at her mercy like this. She had him overpowered in every aspect, including endurance and it wouldn't be long before one of those blocks of his failed. The Necromancer had taken to attacking her, but dodging his artes wasn't especially difficult. Though he'd increased his repertoire since the last time they met, there wasn't anything beyond her ability to handle. Cantabile hesitated a moment, all the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. Without taking a second to think about it, she jumped aside immediately re-launching her attack from her new position.

The younger redhead hadn't even seen what had happened when pain shot up his leg and toppled him over. Guy blocked Cantabile's strike just in time to save Luke's life, and the young noble wasted no time getting out of the line of fire. Fire flew up his leg with every step he took and he hadn't made it five steps before falling over again. Tear rushed to his side.

"Come on now Legretta," Cantabile called out. "You've got better aim than that!" The replying shot that flew just an inch from her face told her that Legretta caught on to what she meant.

"Easy Luke, I'm trying to work as fast as I can," Tear did her utmost to reassure the redhead as she tended to the wound. The melodist eyed his injury. Thankfully it didn't look like the bullet had gone too deep, but having to remove it on the field of battle was not going to painless. Jade had very quickly placed himself between the two and the ensuing battle while Anise and Guy held Cantabile's attention; but she still wouldn't have much time to work. Much to everyone's surprise, the task of protecting them was made much easier by the occasional shots, verbal and otherwise, that the God-Generals made at each other.

"Can you do something to make it stop hurting until we've dealt with Legretta and Cantabile?" Luke asked.


"Luke, you are not to move from that spot," Jade threw in, also fully aware of Luke's intentions.

Luke opened his mouth to protest, but Tear placed a finger over his lips. "Listen to Jade. I'll need more time to heal the deeper wounds, and-

"That has to wait until later," Luke finished, realizing the situation he was in. "It's okay, but I'm not sitting here if you need my help."

"We'll see about that," Tear argued. Luke bit his lip to keep from crying out as the melodist removed the bullet. Seventh fonons quickly took its place and the pain subsided to a dull throb. Tear quickly bandaged the wound, and took Jade's place, allowing the Necromancer to properly position himself on the battlefield. Behind her, she could hear Luke pick up his sword.

"Luke..." Tear said warningly between artes.

"I'm not going anywhere," Luke reassured her, hints of disappointment evident in his tone. He could tell, though the pain had subsided thanks to Tear's healing, that he was going to be nothing but a burden if tried to get back in the fray. And if he was a burden, he was going to get someone killed. "But I'm not going to be an open target either."
Fair enough, Tear concluded as she focused on healing a sword wound that Guy had just incurred. All things considered it was a good idea that he was at least ready to defend himself, especially with the way Major Cantabile seemed to go after him and Asch. But Tear knew why that was, Major Cantabile had lost her family to the destruction on Hod, and so the logical person to blame was the man who had lead the slaughter. Her former teacher wanted to inflict that loss on him as well, but Tear wouldn't allow that. Luke and Asch weren't to blame, and she refused to see her dearest friends hurt.

Tear swallowed hard, she didn't want to see anyone hurt. If they could finish this, safely lower the lands and not have to make any more sacrifices, then she would be happy. If she was the only one to be lost, than she would be able to rest in peace. But she wasn't the only sacrifice. Tear knew that, but she hadn't the heart to face it... because even though he was her enemy, Van was the only family she had, and she didn't want to see him die.

"Why are you doing this?" Tear demanded, throwing the question out at both her teachers.

"Tear, you of all people should know why," Legretta answered.

"It's not too late for you to stop this foolishness," Cantabile added. "Why are you so intent on scorning Van's attempts to save the world, and you're destroying yourself to do it! None of us want to see you like that, but it affects him most of all. Do you have any idea how much it upsets him? Don't you care about him at all?"

"I could ask the same of you!" Tear shot back.

"What do you mean by that?" Legretta demanded.

"You know!" Tear declared. "You know that using the passage rings is killing him. If he keeps this up, he'll destroy himself!"

"It's a sacrifice he's willing to make if it means saving this world from Yulia's Score," Cantabile answered easily sidestepping several of Guy's attacks.

"That's a lie," the melodist argued. "You're just making excuses! Don't say it's a necessary sacrifice, because it isn't. He doesn't have to do this! There are other ways!"

"This is the only way," Legretta replied, but her voice didn't carry the conviction it usually did.

"No it isn't! And if either of you cared about him as much as you say you do, you wouldn't let him destroy himself like that. You'd try and help him find a way so he could live. You'd figure out something!"

Taking advantage of their distraction, Asch made a move for the violet-haired God-General, but she was faster and easily blocked his attack. The battle renewed with incredible intensity, apparently Tear's words had more impact than expected. Interesting that. Jade logged the information away, though he hoped they'd be able to end this today and not have to worry about either of them again.

Unfortunately, that was far easier said than done. Luke was out of the running, but Jade had to commend the boy for finding a way to help out without disobeying orders. He didn't miss the random assortment of artes that were coming from Luke's direction. It had Jade keeping a sharper eye on him and Tear though; helpful as he was trying to be, it made them a more likely target.

Yet, despite Luke's efforts, the loss of him in the fray was proving to be detrimental. Tear was restricted in terms of movement, and Jade didn't dare stray too far, knowing full well if he did Tear
would have two God-Generals on her hands. Van had proven over and over he wanted Luke dead, and the two women before them were willing to do just about anything to please the Commandant. No, Luke was not in a good position at all... and if this kept up, neither were they.

And their position was about to get much worse. Jade noticed a head of green hair at the back of the battlefield, where it most certainly should not be.

Just what was Ion doing? Luke watched the Fon Master, wishing nothing more than to able to run over there and yank him out of harm's way. Ion was always really good about staying out of danger during battle and had gotten really good at predicting in which direction a fight would shift, so most of the time they didn't pay much attention to him and focused on defeating their opponents. What was he doing heading out into the middle of the battlefield?!

"Ion what are you doing?!" Anise demanded.

Both Cantabile and Legretta noticed the Fon Master and shook off their attackers, immediately making their way towards him. Killing those that opposed the Commandant was important but Ion was the bigger prize, and it was too good an opportunity to pass up. That's when Luke figured out Ion's trap. After all Ion was completely defenceless, right? At least, that's what must have gone through Cantabile and Legretta's heads, because they certainly hadn't seen what was coming. The entire ground lit up and the force of the arte sent a wave of impact that shook the leaves of the nearby trees. It was the same Daathic fonic arte he'd seen Ion use in the Cheagle Woods against the ligers, and he'd caught both God-Generals in it.

Cantabile and Legretta both dropped to their knees. Anise wasted no time hauling the weakened Fon Master away from their opponents. Both of them had taken some serious damage from Ion's attack, but they weren't out of the running just yet. But honestly, what was Ion thinking? If he'd been just a second late he'd have been captured!

Cantabile managed to pull herself to her feet, with Legretta not far behind her, but both were showing the damage they had taken. Just standing looked like it took an incredible amount of effort, and they had no small number of injuries. But in spite of that, both women had a very good reason to have to go on.

Jade, however, had absolutely no intention of letting them do so. Seeing the obvious opening, he launched an attack on Legretta whose guard was lower than her companion's.

Legretta saw the attack coming, but even as the Necromancer's spear drew threateningly close, she had no room to react or to counter. Damn it all! She refused to go down like this, at his hand of all people's. The next thing Legretta heard was the sound of clashing metal as Cantabile's sword met the Necromancer's assault. The spear was deflected, but his attack wasn't over.

Jade's arte set off at point blank range, blasting both Cantabile, and consequently Legretta, back several feet. They managed to remain standing, but only barely.

Legretta reeled from the blow, trying to recover what strength was left in her. Cantabile too fought to regain her balance and her defence. Why...why had Cantabile come to her defence? There had never been any love lost between the two of them and doing so put her at a clear tactical disadvantage. Such constantly irrational behaviour... she should have expected as much.

"Hmph," Cantabile lowered her sword, no longer completely able to disguise her laboured breathing. "I think it's time we retreated."

"No," Legretta argued. "I will not back down until I've completed the mission assigned to me."
"You can stay here and die if you want," Cantabile shrugged. "But you're no good to Van that way."

"Tch," Legretta spat conceding defeat for the time being. She hated failure, but Cantabile was right, and in their state they didn't stand a chance against all seven opponents. Victory would have to wait for another day.

"I'm afraid we simply can't let you go quietly," Jade said, readying himself for another skirmish.

Cantabile smirked. "Who said anything about going quietly?" The violet haired God-General pulled something from within her uniform and with a quick arte set it aflame.

The flare burned brighter than anything Luke had ever seen and even from a distance it was painful to look at. Everyone instinctively shielded their eyes, from the unexpected assault. By the time the flare had burnt out, both women had vanished.

Jade sighed disappointedly at he allowed his spear to dissipate into the fonons from which it was made. He surveyed the damage; thankfully, neither God-General found the need to leave a trail of destruction in their wake while everyone's defence had been down, if that was even the path they had taken in their escape. Tear immediately began to properly tend Luke's injuries while Anise scolded Ion for his actions. Quite an unusual turn of events for the normally shy Fon Master to say the least. Though it had undoubtedly been what ultimately turned the tables on their unexpected encounter.

The fact that they had needed him to turn the tables is what concerned Jade the most. The God-Generals were proving time and time again that they were not to be trifled with. Van was growing serious, which no doubt meant the time for his plans to come to fruition was drawing near.

Asch sat down next to Luke and everyone quickly settled around them in unspoken agreement to take a small break. Natalia took over for Tear and tended to the last of Luke's leg and everyone else's minor injuries. It had been quite the battle and many of them were exhausted, though they still found it in them to sustain a small conversation. Unfortunately an hour was really all they could spare to rest and sooner than anyone would have liked they found themselves getting ready to proceed.

"Ion, are you sure you're up for this?" Anise asked for the millionth time.

Ion walked up to the Daathic seal. "I'll be fine Anise," he reassured her. Before anyone else could protest, the young Fon Master placed his hands over the seal and several glyphs appeared, taking the strange barrier with them as they faded.

"Ion!" Anise caught her charge when he collapsed backwards. Well... he technically wasn't her charge, but that didn't mean she was going to stop worrying about him! She should have known he wouldn't be able to handle two Daathic fonic artes so close together.

"I'm sure he'll be fine," Jade reassured the girl. "He doesn't have the strength his original did so the artes take a much greater toll on his body, but some decent rest is all he needs. I'm sure you don't mind lending him Tokunaga for a nap."

Anise grumbled, though she knew that the Colonel wasn't going to stand for anymore delays, and knowing Ion he'd probably sleep clear through until tomorrow morning. They really did have to hurry, the Colonel had made a good point about the Commandant getting more aggressive. It probably meant they were running out of time. But she still didn't like it.
The passage ring in Tataroo Valley was just like all the passage rings they had come to know, both in design and in structure. However, for the first time over their journey, they found themselves held back by the Yulian seal. At Mount Roneal, Sync had already broken the seal so he could observe the Sephiroth, and before that Van had already unlocked them all. But here it was still intact and posed as quite the obstacle.

In the end Jade had figured out how to undo the seal, some sort of key using fonons that only he would be able to figure out. Asch cursed the man for being so ridiculously smart. He'd only figured out the first bit in the time in took Jade to unlock the entire thing. Oh well, it was done and that's what should matter. Besides, who wanted to compete with the old man? He certainly didn't.

Tear took a deep breath as she looked up at the passage ring. Now it was her turn. The lack of hesitation in her actions surprised her. She wasn't afraid or uncertain, even knowing that this was significantly shortening her life, and may even claim it. This was what she had to do to protect those she cared about and to put a stop to her brother. In her mind there were no alternatives and it was a price she was willing to pay. She had forfeit her life long ago, on that fateful day she had left Yulia City, swearing to stop her brother no matter what the cost.

The melodist continued to make her way towards the passage ring, but Luke walked over and placed himself in her way. Tear stopped a moment wondering if maybe he had something to say but he didn't say a thing, just stared her down with an amazing amount of determination and conviction in his eyes. Tear motioned to move around him, but Luke sidestepped and got in her way. She tried again; again with the same result.

"Come on Luke, you're in my way. Could you please move aside?" The melodist asked, trying to keep her annoyed tone to a minimum.

"No, I'm not letting you do this," Luke declared.

"Luke, we've gone over this already!" Anise protested. She was getting exasperated by Luke's antics. No one else liked it either, but there wasn't any other choice. Luke was just determined to make this difficult!

"Anise is right Luke, we've already talked about this," Tear agreed. "Now please let me pass."

"No," Luke repeated as intent as before. "There's no reason for you to do this, or to get any sicker."

"Luke, we don't have any other choice!"

"That's just an excuse. I can operate the passage ring. There are other options! You don't have to do this, there is something else we can do!"

"And what's that?" Tear demanded. "Have you get sick too, or Asch for that matter? Are you that eager to throw your life away? I'm already affected, there's no reason for anyone else to get sick! Why throw away more lives than we have to?"

"I don't care! I don't want to see you-"

'Luke... get out of her way.'

Luke froze mid-sentence and the hard stare Asch was giving him told everyone what was going on.

'No! I'm not going to let her-'
'Luke!' Asch silenced his sibling. 'You have a job to do too.'

'But I just...'

'I know. But this isn't the time or the place.'

Luke averted his gaze from the melodist and she brushed past him. The redhead heard the sound of the passage ring activating and swallowed hard. He had to bury his feelings for now. He had a job to do, and screwing it up was not on the list of options.

Tear watched Luke work. There was no doubt he was hurt, but he was being foolish and making this harder than it had to be. She wondered what Asch had said to him to make him stop; and wondered if it was that, or her words that had him so upset. Irregardless, she wasn't going to let him take her place. She cared for him too much to see him subject to such a fate and... and no one else should have to pay the price for her brother's actions.

"The same thing as last time?" Luke inquired, his voice monotone and empty.

"That's correct," Jade replied. "We need to connect all the Sephiroth to the Absorption Gate." Luke nodded in acknowledgment and put himself to work carving the complex commands. Jade observed his progress and was impressed. By this point he'd managed to master the general principle of how to word the commands and with a few minor corrections, that he suspected came from Asch, Luke had all the Ancient Ispanian correct as well.

The golden glow around Luke dissipated indicating he'd completed his task. A job well done considering his temperament earlier, but Natalia wouldn't fault him for his feelings. Tear was very dear to him after all, even if either of them had yet to realize it.

Before Jade had finished double checking Luke's work, the entire Sephiroth shook violently sending Anise and Natalia both tumbling over and everyone else into a fight to remain on their feet. Following its master's lead, Tokunaga also fell over sending Ion crashing into a wall.

"Ion, all you alright?" Anise picked herself up and hurried to his side.

"I'm fine..." Ion provided, still looking around trying to orient himself. He was completely confused after being rather rudely awakened from his nap.

"No you're not, you're bleeding!" The former Fon Master Guardian protested, noticing the injury on the back of his head.

"Here, let me see that," Natalia quickly examined the extent of the damage. It wasn't nearly as bad as it looked, no more than a light scratch, really. The Princess reassured the fretting Anise and with little effort healed the cut.

"What happened?" Luke asked in a panic. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Well played," Jade commented, his eyes darting back and forth across the glyph on the ceiling.

"What's going on? What happened?" Asch asked.

"Memory particles are flowing in reverse from the Absorption Gate. It's stimulating the core by using the power of all the connected Sephiroth," Jade explained, his own voice more unsettled than usual.

"Only someone who can control the passage rings could do that," Guy commented.
"Van!" Tear realized. "But why...?! If he's at the Absorption Gate and reversed the flow of memory particles, then the Sephiroth Tree where he is will be reversed, and the entire Tuft Archipelago will fall along with the gate."

"No," Jade countered. "We made the power of the Sephiroth to flow into the Absorption Gate. He's probably using the excess power from that to reverse the Sephiroth. In fact, if anything's going to fall, it'll be everything except the Absorption Gate."

"Wait a second," Anise spoke up. "The Tartarus is neutralizing the vibrations in the core, right? If this is stimulating the core..."

"Then the Tartarus will break apart!" Natalia finished, realizing what Anise was getting at.

"Oh no!" Mieu said from his perch on Natalia's head. "What are we going to do! We can't let everyone get hurt!"

"Damn it!" Asch cursed. "How much time do we have?"

"Days, a week at most," Jade concluded.

"But we haven't even visited the Sephiroth in Daath!" Guy pointed out. "There's no way we'll make it in time!"

"Can you connect the Sephiroth in Daath to the Absorption Gate from here?" Ion asked.

"It would be possible if the seal had been broken and the Sephiroth activated, but I'm afraid that isn't the case," Jade replied.

"Please, if you could, is there any way to try?" Ion inquired. Jade eyed Ion curiously, wondering what had him so determined. It was unlike him to push an issue without a reason to do so, and Jade couldn't fathom any possible reason. But it was worth a try, they were doomed to fail otherwise; or else they'd have to sacrifice Daath, not a pleasant thought at all.

Jade nodded at Luke who awaited his decision. The young noble was unusually focused and seemed to be working much faster than usual. But with Tear slowly weakening, he would have to work quickly. Much to Jade's surprise, Daath's Sephiroth was completely responsive to their commands.

"Fon Master," Jade spoke up as Luke worked. "An explanation, if you will."

"It was the original Ion that initially developed the plan that Van is currently implementing," Ion explained.

"Seriously?!!" Anise asked in awe.

"I'm afraid so. At an early age, he read his own death in the Score and grew to hate it. Though I was never told the details of what those plans were, Van did attempt to get my assistance several times. I believed there was a good chance the original Ion opened the seal to the Sephiroth in Daath, so Van could have access when the time came. It may also explain why Van has been able to access the Absorption Gate."

"Saved by a lucky break," Guy muttered.

"Not if we don't make it to the Absorption Gate in time," Asch commented. Across the way, Luke exhaled and lowered his arms, trying to hide his breathing. That hadn't been the easiest of tasks,
even with all the practice he'd gotten over the course of their journey.

"Okay Tear," Jade nodded to the melodist who promptly, released the passage ring. Luke made his way over towards her and placed his arm around her.

"Luke! What are... you..." Tear began to protest but hadn't even finished her sentence before fatigue crashed over her. She passed out into his arms. Silently, Luke maneuvered her onto his back and rejoined the others. It was becoming a hauntingly familiar routine.

"Absorption Gate next then?" Natalia inquired.

"We don't have a choice, unfortunately." Jade replied. "The journey to the Absorption Gate alone will be a couple days. We need to be going as soon as possible."

"Luke, will you be okay with Tear?" Asch asked. Luke nodded, she was surprisingly light, and when she got like this, she was even more so.

The journey back down Tataroo Valley was quiet as the sunset bathed the foliage in various shades of orange and gold. It seemed so much slower than the walk up and it left Luke with more time to think. Asch would occasionally share a thought on a random topic, probably to keep him from letting his mind travel into those dark depths it seemed to be so familiar with these days.

Despite his sibling's efforts, his thoughts kept returning to the melodist on his back. She still hadn't woken up and was so very light and frail. Why did she do this... why wouldn't she let him help her? It frustrated Luke, and he didn't know what to do. He cared about her! He didn't want to see this happen to her, especially when there was something he could do.

He could feel it, now that he knew what it was, he could feel the tainted Seventh fonons that were accumulating in her body. There were so many more of them now, and that just meant she was going to get sicker and sicker until she... until she eventually- Luke couldn't even finish the thought.

'Maybe you should let me carry her,' Asch suggested.

'No, please let me,' Luke argued. 'It's the only thing I can do for her.'

'Okay, but don't push yourself too hard.'


_You're such a liar._

The fire crackled in the wilderness behind the blond. They had finally set down for the night, and everyone who wasn't asleep was seated around the flames. It wouldn't be too long before it was time for bed, but for now they were just enjoying each other's company. After all, this was it. Either they stopped Van and went back to their normal lives, or they would be killed.

But that wasn't what was on Guy's mind right now, and seeing as he had Asch in tow, it wasn't what was on the older redhead's mind either. Luke had left right after supper saying he was going to bed early, and Guy just wanted to talk with him. Luke had a lot on his mind with all this Tear business; it couldn't be good for him. He just wanted to make sure his best friend was alright.
Guy quietly opened the door to Luke's room, expecting to see him asleep in his bed. That didn't turn out to be the case at all. Luke was sitting up, his arms curled around his knees, and he was visibly shaking. Luke looked up at his visitors, a strangely frightened look in his eyes. It was the first time since Guy could remember that he thought Luke actually looked his age. Not the age he supposedly was, but his real age. The Luke that was sitting on the bed was a scared seven year old, who was so overwhelmed that he didn't know what to do any more.

Asch followed Guy into the room and carefully closed the door behind him as not to wake up Tear or Ion who were both fast asleep nearby. He paused for moment when his eyes met his sibling, and Guy could see the same thoughts go through his head. But Asch smiled and sighed before sitting down on the bed next to his little brother. Guy sat down on the other side of the bed. Luke's eyes followed their movements but he didn't say anything.

"You had another nightmare, didn't you?" Asch asked. Luke looked down at his knees, avoiding both his companion's eyes.

"How long has this been going on?" Guy asked.

Still no answer.

"Why didn't you ever say anything?" Asch questioned, determined to get some sort of response from his brother.

"I didn't want anyone to worry," Luke finally provided, his voice quiet and meek. "Everyone has so much to worry about, I didn't want them to be worrying about me too."

"You idiot," Guy said fondly. "What do you think we're here for?"

"Guy's right," Asch agreed. "You don't have to do this alone, neither of us do. We have friends now; it's okay to share what you're feeling. We can't make everything go away, but we'll carry your burdens with you."

"We all share in the responsibility for Akzeriuth," Guy continued. "So don't think you have to go at it by yourself. We'll all shoulder it together, that's what it means to be friends."


His and Luke's eyes remained locked for several minutes and Asch watched his sibling deeply considering what they'd both said. Even though some of the light had returned to his eyes, the aura had that settled over him didn't lift.

"So are you ready to tell us what's really wrong?" Asch asked.

Guy smiled when Luke's gaze turned to him and he placed a comforting hand on his best friend's shoulder. At the warmth of the gesture the last of Luke's front broke down and Guy found him sobbing in his arms. Luke had Guy's shirt tightly clasped in his grip and the blond gently stroked his hair as he had done when Luke was a child.

"I- I don't want Tear to die!" Luke finally managed between sobs.

"Luke..." Guy said, but didn't know what answer to offer him.

"It's- it's all my fault! If I hadn't screwed up in Akzeriuth none of this would be happening. Tear wouldn't have had to use the passage rings, and- and she wouldn't be sick like this!"
"This isn't your fault," Asch said gently.

"But it is! If I had noticed it sooner... or if-"

"Luke, you can't keep blaming yourself," Guy protested. "You can go 'what if' forever but it won't change what's happening, and you won't find any answers. Tear made this choice on her own, because she wanted to protect us, she wanted to protect you."

"But..." Luke's protest was lost in his sobbing.

"You're not alone in this, so stop trying to shoulder everything on your own," Guy reminded him.

"We're all right here," Asch added. "And we aren't going anywhere."

Both Asch and Guy sat in silence and let Luke cry. All those bottled feelings, all that pent up frustration at his inability to do anything had finally erupted and Luke just had to get them all out. Akzeriuth... the passage rings... Tear... Luke had carried too many silent burdens, and it had finally gotten the better of him. But maybe... maybe, they had gotten through to him a little. Maybe next time he would ask to talk about whatever was bothering him. It was a habit that both he and Asch shared, and one that they were both overdue to break. They weren't alone anymore, they didn't have to be.

Luke's sobs eventually weakened and the time between them increased. Asch smiled at the familiarity of the situation. He stood up as Guy moved the sleeping redhead off his chest.

"This brings back memories," the blond whispered.

"Yeah, no kidding," Asch agreed.

"I wonder if he's going to start trusting us a little more," Guy wondered.

"This isn't about trust," Asch replied. "It's about holding onto something too tightly, being afraid to move on, afraid to let go... and afraid to forget." Guy couldn't resist a smile. The tone in Asch's voice told him that this was something with which Asch was intimately familiar.

"You gonna let him sleep in your bed with you?" Guy asked jokingly.

Asch cocked an eyebrow before staring at the narrow bunks. "Whose bed have you been sleeping in?"

"No one's!" Guy protested. Asch harshly shushed him with a nod in Luke's direction, all the while wearing a mischievous grin. He placed his hands square on the blond's shoulders and started shoving him towards the door. "Okay, okay I get it," Guy whispered, softly opening the door before him.

The blond nearly tripped over an unexpected former Fon Master Guardian as he walked out of the room and it really was a wonder his responding cry didn't wake anyone up.

"A-Anise... what are you doing here?" Guy managed. But the dark haired girl didn't have the amused smile she always wore in face of Guy's phobia, rather, she was quite serious.

"Is Luke going to be alright?" She asked.

Both Guy and Asch fell silent.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to eavesdrop or anything, but I was going to check on Ion and I heard him
crying. I was worried," Anise paused for a moment. "It's about Tear isn't it?"

"Yeah, he's pretty upset about it," Guy replied.

"But don't worry," Asch said. "He'll be just fine." The redhead placed his hand on her head and playfully ruffled her hair.

"Hey!" Anise protested. "You're making a mess of my hair! I'm not your little sister you know! You can't just do that to people."

"Now Anise, is that really any way to talk to a marriage prospect?" Guy inquired.

"Oh I gave up on him ages ago," Anise replied as she went about trying to fix her hair. "Natalia has him way too whipped for me to stand a chance. But you on the other hand are gorgeous and single..."

"And rich," Asch added.

"I don't like the implications of that..." Guy backed off a few steps.

Anise approached the blond and the two of them returned outside to the fire, one fleeing for their life from the other. Asch shook his head, some things never changed. He took one last look at the door behind which Luke slept. He was certain of his answer, now more than ever.

Luke would be just fine.

No matter where he looked everything was black. Luke stood, swallowed by an unending emptiness. Here there was no ground, nor was there a sky. It was hauntingly familiar, a prison of his mind from which he could not escape. He was doomed to live through this endless cycle, for no matter how hard he tried, he could never find a way to save them.

Luke stood alone amidst the nothingness, his heart racing. He had to move, he had to step forward. Master Van had to be stopped or else more people would die. More people would die and it would be his fault. The world was waiting for him to save it. But he was scared...

What if he fell?

If he fell there would be nothing to stop him, no one to save him. He would fall forever into this unending darkness knowing that he had failed. Failed to save the word, failed to save his friends, failed to save Akzeriuth... He just couldn't... he couldn't do it.

'You can't save them,' Asch's voice came from behind him and Luke spun around. This never happened; this world never changed. He had lived this endless cycle countless times and never once had it varied, he had always been alone.

You're not alone.

'I have to,' Luke replied. 'I can't leave them to die.'

'Luke, Akzeriuth is gone. You can't keep coming back here. You have to move on.'

'No... I can't.' Fear consumed the young replica and he could no longer face his sibling.
'You have to move on,' Asch repeated. 'You have to step forward.'

Luke shook his head in denial. He knew that but he couldn't! Something deep within him glued him to this spot. Guilt, fear, regret, it had many names, many forms but it was all the same. He couldn't just abandon the people of Akzeriuth, not after what he'd done. He couldn't just leave all that behind.

'Moving on doesn't mean you have to forget,' Luke's reflection said softly as if all Luke's doubts had been laid bare before him. Luke looked up and saw Asch smiling at him. 'You don't have to forget, but you can't let that memory destroy you.'

'I don't know how...'

'No one really does,' Asch replied. 'It's hard, and sometimes it feels like you're losing something important. But that only means you've been holding on too tightly. You have to let go.'

'How are you so strong?' Luke asked helplessly. 'You always know what to do... I can't even do it when the answer is given to me.'

'I'm not strong, not at all,' Asch admitted. 'I'm able to keep moving because I have someone looking out for me. That's why you have friends, to help you with those things you can't do by yourself.'

Asch smiled and extended his hand.

'I can't... what if I fall?'

'Then we'll fall together.'

Luke paused. He was still afraid, his feet all the more aware of the ground, or lack thereof below him. No! He couldn't do it. Luke stared below him, emptiness opening up and threatening to swallow him. The fear just wouldn't let go. Why? Why couldn't he be as strong as everyone else was?

'It's okay to be afraid, but don't let it hold you back.'

When Luke looked up again, Asch was no longer standing before him alone. Behind Asch stood every single one of his friends, their encouraging smiles beckoning him forward. He couldn't stay here, he had always known that. He'd given himself countless reasons to move forward, but not once had he found the strength to do it. He'd been too afraid, too scared of falling into the endless abyss. Asch was right, his fear had been holding him back.

But everyone was waiting for him. They all stood there patiently, and Luke wasn't going to be left behind. They all reached out, inviting him forward, and he trusted them. As long as they were with him, Luke knew that he wouldn't fall.

Luke reached out and took Asch's hand. The darkness around him shattered and for a moment Luke could have sworn he caught a glimpse of himself where Asch had stood before everything faded away.

We'll step forward... together.
At the Time of Farewell

Snow fell gently from the darkened sky that was set ablaze by the fonon stream that sliced it in half. The Absorption Gate, which was located about half a day north of Keterburg, had weather much like the small snowbound town. Of course, being even further north, it was a lot colder and that was undoubtedly the first thing everyone noticed as they made their way off the Albiore. Mieu, who had initially been excited to tag along, quickly decided he would remain with Ginji where it was warmer.

Here at one of the world's strongest Sephiroth, the Planet Storm returned from the fon belt and passed through the core, where it was consequently fed back up to the fon belt through the Radiation Gate. Asch watched the Planet Storm, contemplating the many tasks that lay before them. It had finally come down to the end, here they would either put a stop to Van's machinations, or the world would die.

But was it really the end? It didn't feel that way and Asch knew that even if they succeeded, things would never be over. They still hadn't figured out anything more regarding Lorelei, or how to free him from the core; then there were still his responsibilities back home and with the Outer lands soon to be in the Qliphoth, things at the castle were going to be busier than ever. It was wearying just to think about it, but there wasn't time to worry about that now. First they had to stop Van, then they could worry about everything else.

Upon passing through the entrance to the massive Sephiroth, the first thing Asch noted was just how different it was from the previous passage rings they had visited. Though carefully guarded, many of the other Sephiroth were simple in their designs and reaching the passage rings themselves had been easy enough. Granted they'd never found the need to venture deeper into their depths, the young monarch somehow had the feeling that it didn't really matter. The Absorption Gate was in a world of its own.

Paths branched and twisted, intertwining like stone vines that grew up from the depths of the Sephiroth. The swirling tracks seemed to suspend in midair, passing above and below each other and Asch could only wonder how Yulia had designed such a thing. It was certainly a feat no modern day engineer could manage. He wondered if the confusing layout had been intended to serve as another defence for such an important Sephiroth, or if Yulia had just drawn up the blueprints on an especially creative day.

Everyone continued along the widest path, ignoring many of the smaller branches that led off to Score knew where. Asch hoped it was the right way, because from the looks of this place, it didn't take much to get lost, and if they did, they could be lost for days. Days... that the world didn't have left.

A peculiar feeling came over Asch and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on edge. Instinctively he slowed his pace, his mind racing to find the source. The fonons in the air were acting strangely, but there were so many kicking around here he couldn't make heads or tails of any of it. It was probably nothing, but the insistent prodding at the back of his mind still wouldn't let up. Then his heart dropped.

"It's a trap!" Jade yelled.

A glyph appeared on the floor below them and in a split second, the entire path shattered beneath their feet. Jade grabbed the nearest arm and hauled it forward, just barely getting the young Princess outside the arte's range. At the rear, Guy had managed to snatch the Fon Master and hold
him back out of harm's way, but neither could do anything for their four companions who ended up caught in the middle of it.

Jade stared at the destruction, a large gaping chasm in path on which they had once stood. He cursed himself for not noticing sooner, and not thinking to keep an eye out for such an obvious trap. Of course the Commandant didn't intend to let them stroll right in, and he had been foolish to let his guard down. The Malkuth Colonel carefully peered over the edge of the path. Several dozen feet below, Anise and Tear sat on another of the winding roads. It seemed Tear had reacted quickly enough to protect the two of them from the fall with her hymns. Good thinking on her part, and nothing less than he'd expect from the melodist. Though the trap itself seemed to have done some damage, she was quickly dealing with that and so he didn't concern himself with them for now. The only ones still unaccounted for were the twins.

"Asch! Luke!" Natalia called over the other side of the path. Jade placed a hand on the Princess' shoulder, a quick reminder not to lean too far over and take the dive herself. She met his gaze for a moment, nodded in understanding, but quickly returned her attention to her fiancé.

The boys hadn't fallen as far as Tear and Anise had, but they had grabbed the edge of a suspended track and were just barely holding on. Natalia waited on baited breath, fearing that they would lose their grip and plummet into the Absorption Gate's depths.

"We're alright," Luke called back, hauling himself up to safety before giving Asch a hand up. Unfortunately from the looks of things, they too had incurred some damage from the explosion, but they were too far away from either Tear or Natalia for any healing artes to reach. They should be able to handle it for the time being, but any disadvantage against their coming opponent, no matter how insignificant, would be detrimental.

"Are Tear and Anise okay?" Luke called up to his companions on the platforms above him.

"We're below you!" Anise yelled and Luke managed to spot the two who weren't still on the path above.

"Yeah... but now what?" Guy asked. "There's no way we can get across to you guys, and it doesn't look like any of these paths intersect any time soon."

"We've no choice but to press on," Jade replied, raising his voice so it would carry to the four down below. "Guy, you take Ion back and see if you can find another path down. The rest of us will press forward and hopefully we'll meet up at a later point."

"But what if we run into the Commandant?" Anise asked.

"If he's spotted you, stall him," Asch answered. "Get him talking, anything to buy some time for the rest of us to catch up."

"You may uncover some valuable information that way as well," Jade stated, though it was obviously beside the point. "In the meantime, be cautious of any other traps the Commandant may have left for us."

"Easier said then done," Asch shot.

"Alright, lets get going," Guy intervened. "The sooner we can catch up to each other, the better."

"Don't be too reckless now," Jade called tauntingly after the three separate groups who were leaving.
"Take your own advice, old man," came echoing back, and Jade couldn't help but grin.

"I wonder how far down this goes," Luke spoke up, breaking the silence between him and his twin. He hoped that if they kept moving downwards, and so did everyone else, they would all eventually be lead to the passage ring. That was of course, assuming that none of these paths led into some evil Dawn Age trap.

Out of the corner of his eye, Luke watched Asch rotating his arm while pondering something or another. He was still sore from the fall too. While the two of them hadn't become strangers to a good beating lately, they were definitely noticing the acute lack of a healer. "Who knows," Asch finally answered.

They walked in silence for a bit and Luke continued to admire the sights. These places really were amazing, even if the winding paths seemed a bit pointless. It was a pity, they really made getting to the passage ring that much more of a headache. It seemed the deeper they got, the more the paths spiralled and turned, but Luke was very quickly distracted by the fonons that began lighting the air, falling like snow towards the core.

Luke's eyes met Asch's and the younger redhead gave an apologetic smile. He knew it was annoying for Asch when he got overly excited about little things but Asch shook his head.

"You look better," Asch commented.

"It's just so amazing how you can actually see the fonons," Luke replied.

"That's not what I meant." Luke's excitement dampened and his childish awe grew into a more mature expression before Asch's eyes. He'd seen it before, but the way that Luke slipped in and out of his more childish persona still amazed him.

"Yeah well, I haven't been having any nightmares lately," Luke finally conceded, deciding to stop pretending to avoid the topic.

"I'm glad to hear that." Asch smiled softly.

"I'm sorry for not saying anything." Luke hung his head. "It's not that I didn't trust you or anything like that it's just-"

"It's alright," Asch cut of Luke's tirade. "But don't let me catch you doing it again," he continued, the light tone in his voice as he scolded Luke was indicative of his teasing. "We're family, stupid. That's what we're here for."


Asch laughed. "Fair enough."

"I hope no one's run into Master Van," Luke said once silence had fallen over them again.

"Don't worry, they're smart enough not to take him on alone. After Sheridan we know full well that it's going to take all seven of us to even stand a chance."

"I wish there was some other way..."

"What do you mean by that?" Asch asked curiously.
"I wish we could find a way to convince him to stop, to get him to change his mind..."

"Luke, we've tried that already. He's not going to give up on his ideals, just like we can't give up on ours. He didn't reach this point because it's something he happened to feel like doing, he's gotten this far because he believes there is no other choice. You're not going to be able to hesitate. If you do, he'll kill you."

"I know that... but I still want to try."

"Luke..." Asch began warningly. There was nothing wrong with Luke wanting to avoid killing someone he had once respected, but he had to realize they were beyond the point where it was a choice. If they didn't kill Van, Van would kill them and then he'd sacrifice the world.

"It's not just for me," Luke answered. "He's Tear's older brother. If it was you on that side, I would want do absolutely anything I could, so I have to try, even if it doesn't go anywhere."

"And if doesn't work and he won't listen?"

"Then at least I know I did everything I could," Luke answered with conviction. Asch nodded and they continued on in silence.

"You know, I almost wish we had gotten separated," Luke commented after navigating a few confusing trails. "At least then getting back together would have been a little easier. It would be nice if we knew where everyone else is right now."

"Definitely would be nice to make some use of... oh what did Anise call it?"

"CCN," Luke provided almost automatically.

"That is the stupidest name I've ever heard," Asch rolled his eyes.

"It's technically Jade's name for it," the younger sibling pointed out.

"Then it's that much stupider. I'd expect the old man to come up with something better than that."

Luke laughed. "You know," he said after a bit. "I was surprised you weren't more upset with them finding out about our connection."

"You were asleep at the time."

"Yeah, but you're really okay about it all. I mean, after they found out about our hyperresonance you were upset for weeks."

"Our hyperresonance is a bit more dangerous," Asch pointed out. He shrugged. "It just doesn't bother me as much. We've been too busy for me to care," he added teasingly.

"Yeah, I guess we have been kind of busy lately, but at least we're almost done."

"Hardly."

"That's right," Luke realized. "I guess you're going to be really busy up at the castle with all the lands in the Qliphoth."

"Unbelievably," Asch replied, his tone showing he was not looking forward to it in the least.

"Wait... what about the miasma?" The horrible thought suddenly dawned on Luke. "The lands
aren't going to be covered in miasma, are they?!

Asch looked at Luke confusedly. "Oh, that's right, you were out cold," Asch suddenly realized. "Jade was explaining it on the Albiore after we finished with the core. No, there won't be any problems with the miasma."

"How is that going to work?"

"To keep it simple, the miasma is going to be pushed downwards as the lands lower, and we'll trap it all in the core. It has to do with something called the dividing line which helps hold the lands up. According to the old man, it should be good enough to keep it from getting out and causing any problems."

"But what about Lorelei?"

"All the more reason we'll have to figure out how to free him, but we can worry about that once things settle down. Even without the miasma, there is going to be a lot to sort through."


"Help? Help with what?"

"I don't know... anything I can help you with."

"Why?"

"I don't want to go back to sitting around the manor doing nothing all day," Luke confessed. "I just... I can't do that anymore."

Asch smiled. "Of course. I don't know how much you can do, but you can definitely help out."

"Thanks!"

Asch chuckled, his laugh having an almost evil edge to it. "You have no idea what you're getting yourself into."

Jade carefully eyed the path, his gaze following the markings that were discreetly carved along its edges. He carefully pondered the nature of this arte before using one of his own to obliterate three select symbols. Taking a small stone in his hand, he tossed it forward. Nothing; the trap was disarmed.

"Our Commandant has certainly been getting creative," Jade commented, inviting the Princess forward with a sweep of his hand.

"My, that's the third trap you've disarmed now," Natalia noted, carefully watching the ground as she walked. "I certainly hope that Asch and the others are alright."

"I wouldn't worry too much, Princess. It's unlikely that Van had the opportunity to lay traps on all the different passages. Our redheads will be just fine. They're together, after all, and Asch at the very least has enough sense to find and avoid them."

"Really, you needn't call me 'Princess'," Natalia commented. "We're friends after all, Natalia is just fine."
"Certainly, Princess."

Natalia sighed and rolled her eyes. "Must you always be like that?"

"Be like what?" Jade asked ever so innocently.

"So... like you."

"Well if I weren't myself, who else should I be?"

"I suppose that's very true," Natalia said with a chuckle. "Actually, while it's simply the two of us, I want to take the opportunity to thank you."

"Oh? And what's this for all of a sudden?" Jade adjusted his glasses.

"For helping Asch and I to put an end to the war and hostilities between our countries. I realize it's a gratitude that is long overdue."

"Yes well, I didn't do anything really so don't concern yourself."

"No, we wouldn't have succeeded if not for your assistance and for your influence in Grand Chokmah. For simply being a Colonel, you have quite the respect of the court, much more so than your rank would suggest. So don't dismiss your involvement, it was as critical as anyone else's. Though I do have to wonder why you've never gotten a promotion."

"I have enough work to do with my current position, I've no need for the hassle of a promotion." Jade shrugged.

"That makes sense," Natalia replied, knowing full well the increase in burden that came with an increase in rank. "Of course," she slyly suggested. "If Nephry should marry Emperor Peony then your position would correlate with your influence."

"Nephry wouldn't leave Keterburg," Jade commented.

"Are you certain? Emperor Peony does seem especially fond of her, and the feeling appears to be mutual."

"She didn't work to become its governor for nothing."

"Perhaps," Natalia replied. Seeing the look in Jade's eyes told her that in spite of his words, a part of him wanted to see his sister happy. And she had a feeling that didn't mean governing Keterburg alone until the end of her days. The young Princess smiled, "but one never knows what the future will bring."

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"I hope Ion's okay," Anise wondered aloud for the fifth time in the past half hour. Both she and Tear had been wandering for awhile now and even though they were going downwards, they'd yet to come across any sign of others.

"Don't worry Anise, Guy is with him. I'm sure they'll be fine."

"I know, but I'm still worried. It's a really long walk down to the passage ring, and he's still tired from Tataroo Valley."
"Guy will keep an eye out for him, and it's not like the Fon Master is a girl; in the worse case scenario, Guy can carry him."

"Yeah, I guess." Anise shrugged. "While we're on the subject of Tataroo Valley, how are you doing?"

"I'll be alright." Tear provided. "The medication the doctor gave me seems to be working for now."

"Tear... are you really going to use the passage ring here? I mean, the medication might be working and all, but you definitely haven't recovered from the last one."

"I don't have a choice," the melodist said solemnly.

"You always say that, but you know it's not true, right?"

"Anise, we can't let the lands fall and with what my brother's done, they could fall at any time. We can't afford to wait. I'm not going to risk everyone else's lives. There are no other options."

"That's not what I mean, you keep saying the same thing to Luke too. He's offered to work the passage ring for you."

"Why sacrifice two people when we don't have to? I'm not letting Luke get hurt."

"Face it Tear, using one passage ring isn't going to kill him. Spinoza said something about how they're both less affected than you are and it probably has something to do with Lorelei and all that fonon frequency crap that only the Colonel understands. That isn't the issue here."

"W-What are you implying?" Tear stuttered.

Anise sighed, surprising the melodist. She was always the first to get on anyone's case as soon as they hinted at anything, even when it obviously wasn't true... but this time, she had gotten serious.

"Maybe you haven't noticed, but what you're doing is really hurting everyone else."

"I'd rather have them a little upset with me than see them poisoned by the miasma. A few negative feelings are nothing in the face of their lives. I'm not going to risk Luke getting sick when there's absolutely no logical reason to." Tear caught Anise's gaze and was surprised to see a flare of anger in her brown eyes. "What?"

"You haven't seen Luke when you're not around, Tear. He's not 'a little upset', he's broken up about it! The other night he was crying himself to sleep, so don't just dismiss his feelings as 'nothing'!" Tear listened in disbelief.

"No he isn't..." Tear managed. "I haven't noticed anything." Anise was imagining things. Luke may not be happy about her decision, and that he'd expressed, but he still smiled and otherwise went about things as if they were normal.

"Isn't it obvious? He's trying to put up a front for you, he doesn't want you realize how upset he is! No one wants to see you get sick, but Luke more so than anyone!"

"But... why?"

"Ugh!" Anise yanked on her pigtails. "You two are completely identical and both so totally hopeless!" She yelled in frustration before stomping ahead, leaving a very confused melodist in her wake.
"Are you sure you're doing okay Ion?" Guy asked over his shoulder. "We can take another break if you need too."

"No, I should be fine, at least for a little further," Ion smiled. "But thank you for your concern. I'm sorry for slowing you down so much."

"You don't need to apologize, we should be the ones apologizing to you. We're running you pretty ragged, especially lately."

"No, doing those things was my choice, and I was the one who wanted to come along. You don't need to feel bad about it."

"Just out of curiosity, why did you want to tag along?" Guy asked. "Not that I'm against it or anything, but there's no saying how dangerous things could get. It would have been better for you to stay in the Albiore with Ginji and rest."

"Yes well, everything that has happened is a result of several members of the Order of Lorelei. I feel it's my responsibility to see this through to the end, regardless of the dangers involved."

"Yeah..." Guy said solemnly. "We're finally facing down Van."

"That's right, Van was your childhood friend, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, we were really close. Van was like a big brother to me."

"That must make this difficult for you," Ion commented.

"To be honest, it's not as hard as I thought it would be. I still wish there was some way to talk him out of it, but it's because we were so close that I know I can't let him go through with this."

"I'm concerned about the Seventh Fonstone Score that Van knows," Ion admitted. "If Van is taking such drastic actions to eliminate the Score, one can't help but wonder what it says."

"You know, it's sort of like what Asch said. There's more futures out there than the one the Score says. If the Score on the Seventh Fonstone is bad, then we just have to find a different path to take."

"Perhaps you're right. I believe Yulia left us the Score as a guide to help us make the right choices, but people have indeed become too dependant on it, just as Van and the God-Generals say. I think perhaps it's time that the Order of Lorelei moved away from the blind devotion to the Score that we've promoted for so long."

"It won't be easy, but I think that would be the best course of action they could take," Guy agreed. "Do you think you'll be able to do it? You're going to meet with a lot of resistance, people don't like to change."

"It will be difficult, but this is something I want to do," Ion admitted. "To be honest, I've never been anything but a figurehead. Van and Mohs created me in order to prevent chaos in the Order, each with the intention of using it for their own purposes. I've never truly done anything for the Order on my own before."

"You've kept it alive and functioning, I think that's lots," Guy pointed out.
"But it doesn't mean anything to simply exist, I've done that for two years now," Ion said sadly. "To give any benefit to this world, you have to be able to live in it. Unfortunately, my place in such a world is rather questionable."

"Okay, now you're starting to sound like Luke," Guy interrupted the Fon Master. "Don't come down on yourself so hard just because you're a replica. You're doing a lot better than Luke was when he was your age. You should be proud of how far you've come in such a short time. You've stopped a war, and now you're going to help us save the Outer Lands. I don't think all that amounts to nothing. Maybe you're replacing the original Ion, but you've made your own place for yourself. You're not like he used to be, and the Order of Lorelei is much different, thanks to you, than it would have been had he led it this entire time."

"Perhaps you're right," Ion replied. "I'm not my original."

"And from what you've told us about him, I'm glad you're not," Guy added. Ion laughed.

"Thank you, Guy."

"I didn't do anything worth being thanked for," the blond shrugged.

No, that wasn't true at all, Ion realized as he continued to walk alongside his friend. Between himself and Luke, Guy had done more than for which he could ever be thanked.

"Is the passage ring for the Absorption Gate in the core itself?" Natalia asked. She had never considered herself to be an impatient person, but the sheer length of their journey down was beginning to wear on her. She didn't doubt that her concern for the safety of her companions was contributing as well.

"Now, now," Jade teased. "We wouldn't want to reach the passage ring before finding the others now would we?"

"No," Natalia replied, knowing full well that the chances they'd find Van within the vicinity of their destination were very good. "But there's no saying if any of these routes ever meet up."

"That is always a possibility," Jade shrugged and Natalia really couldn't help but wonder if anything ever phased that man. He was far too comfortable with the prospect of never encountering anyone else again, or of facing the Commandant with just the two of them.

But before Natalia had the chance to work through what two ranged fighters could possibly do against Van, a glimpse of red stood out against the endless maroons of the surrounding structures.

"Asch! Luke!" Natalia called out, running ahead as not to miss them where the paths intersected. At the sound of her voice, Asch looked up, but his face quickly grew very serious.

"Natalia, stop!" The Princess froze on the spot.

Jade came up behind her and placed a firm hand on her shoulder, forcefully restraining any further movement. What in all of Auldrant was- Then Natalia noticed the markings on the ground that she had come to recognize as the triggers to many of the artes Van had laid as traps.

The Malkuth Colonel disarmed the trap and Natalia was finally able to breathe again. "That was close..." she managed. "I'm sorry."
"Yes well, do try to be more careful," Jade replied. "Now isn't the time to be reckless."

"I'm glad to see you're both okay," Luke said happily.

"Us as well," Natalia agreed. "We were quite concerned."

"Did you run across any traps Van had laid?" Jade inquired.

"No," Asch replied. "He must not of come this way. How about you?"

"We've seen our share of them," Natalia confessed.

"That means your path is probably the one we should be on."

"I don't suppose you've run into any of the others?" the Princess asked.

Asch turned around and stared at several paths they could see suspended in the distance. "There."

Asch pointed to the middle one that seemed to wind quite a bit. "Tear and Anise are on that one. We saw each other but couldn't join up."

"Good," Jade nodded. "It looks like it will intersect with ours further down. We can wait for them there."

"Now we just have to find Guy and Ion," Luke said with a nod.

"And then the fun begins." Asch rolled his eyes.

Everyone continued on in silence, which was only briefly broken when they met up with the girls. Though they hadn't waited long, here in the depths of the Absorption Gate, time became completely inconsequential. The only light came from the multitude of fonons that fell down towards the core and there was no way of telling how long they'd been wandering, or what time of day it was. While you'd think that would make it easier on everyone, it only put them on edge. Apparently knowing that only half a day had gone by was easier than letting your imagination go at it, and with the way the trails went on forever it wasn't a stretch to think they'd been down here for a week.

Luke was glad they'd managed to catch up with Anise and Tear, but the fact that they still hadn't been able to locate Guy and Ion worried him. There couldn't be that much further to go, and they really didn't have the time or the resources to mount a search if they didn't cross paths soon.

Familiar glyphs came into view, dancing around as had the passages that led up to them, and Luke felt an overwhelming sense of dread. What if something had happened to them? Could they have gotten caught in one of Master Van's traps? What if they'd come across him and were fighting for their lives somewhere other than the passage ring? All things considered, they were all assuming Master Van was somewhere near the Sephiroth... but what if he wasn't?

'They're fine,' Asch cut in, putting an end to Luke's spiralling concerns.

'How do you know that?' Luke looked over at his sibling, and Asch nodded forwards.

"Guy! Ion!" Luke ran up to their remaining companions. Guy quickly put a finger up to his lips, and Luke fell silent.

"The passage ring is just up ahead," Guy whispered. "We saw Van down there. I don't think he spotted us but I have no idea how well sound carries around here."
"I was worried you'd fallen into another trap," Luke admitted, keeping his voice to a whisper.

"No, we didn't run into any other traps," Guy replied. "To be honest, I was really surprised to see Van lay some in the first place. It's not like him to use petty tricks like that."

"I doubt the traps were meant to actually cause any significant harm," Jade replied. "I imagine their function was more aimed towards alerting him to our presence."

"An alarm, huh?" Anise put her hands on her hips. Just great, they had gone and announced their arrival without even knowing it.

"So he knows that we're here. He's not taking any chances," Ion commented.

"No, which is why we have to be extra careful," Asch pointed out.

"What was the Commandant doing when you spotted him?" Anise asked.

"He wasn't doing anything, he was simply standing there," the Fon Master provided.

"I wonder what he could be waiting for," Natalia wondered.

"For the lands to fall," Asch concluded. "He probably isn't taking any chances or leaving us any opening to interfere."

"Looks like we're going to have to face him head on," Guy said solemnly.

"This is it," Asch agreed. "It's all or nothing."

"Yes well," Jade pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. "Nothing isn't an option."

The passage ring that controlled the Absorption Gate was the grandest among Auldrant's ten Sephiroth. The cavern in which it dwelt vaulted up many stories and there was no shortage of the swirling glyphs that were commonplace here. The passage ring's controls were located on a large platform, flat and ideally suited for the battle that was to come eventually. Assuming of course, that one was weary of the unguarded ledges, for the steep precipice undoubtedly dropped far beyond what the eye could see and may even lead down into the core itself. Not that anyone would likely survive the fall to find out.

Van stood alone before the Sephiroth watching the mixed fonon flows. It was an interesting phenomenon, one that occurred only here at the Absorption Gate where the flow of the Sephiroth that supported the land was opposite that of the Planet Storm which drew fonons to the core. Not that it would exist for much longer. Soon the Sephiroth would be no more, and they would be the first of Yulia's many creations to vanish from history forever.

Over his shoulder, the Commandant eyed the entrance to the chamber in which he stood, wondering how soon he'd see someone pass through it. One of his traps had been triggered so he knew Asch and his band of fools were here, and he knew that they were intelligent enough not to let such a petty thing defeat them. They would, however, be defeated. Van had no doubt of that.

A grin spread across his face as the sound of footsteps filled the air behind him and Van could feel a certain sense of satisfaction. It had all played itself out perfectly; all the players were in place. The game could finally begin.
"Van!" Asch yelled.

"Well, well, I see you've made it all the way here," the Commandant turned to face his opponents. "Asch, have you come to change your mind?"

"I told you before, not on your life," the redhead seethed.

"Pity, I had hoped I wouldn't need to force your cooperation."

"Van! Why are you doing this?" Tear demanded.

"I'm doing this to spare the world of the curse Yulia placed upon it," Van replied.

"But the Score is already off-track. Yulia's Score is not an absolute future, there are many paths the world can take," Ion said with a determination and strength that took his companions by surprise. "I believe that Luke's and my existence are proof of that."

"Heh," Van turned to Luke. "You think your pitiful existence is going to save this world? You are meaningless; an insignificant deviation like you is nothing before Yulia's Score. The leaves may change but the true essence of the tree does not. The Score is a drug, leading men to meagre joys all the while masking its heart of destruction. But as each Score reveals itself to be true, then people want to believe the next and the next ones as well. Over 2000 years, mankind has become completely addicted to the Score."

"And you think your replica world is the solution?" Natalia asked. "That's just as distorted and convoluted as you claim the Score to be!"

"She's right," Guy agreed. "Maybe this world is twisted and ruled by the Score, but the idea of a replica world is just as twisted."

"I will eliminate this doomed existence that is bound to the Score. Unless humanity can create a new world, without the Score, it will perish," the Commandant replied. "Is it really such a sin to wish for the future?"

"That's no future at all! All you're doing is destroying the futures of every person on this planet!" Anise protested.

"And the only thing your twisted ideals are doing is make your sister suffer!" Asch pointed out.

"Mystearica," Van began, his voice slightly softer and betraying a hint of regret. "It's unfortunate, if only you'd stayed in Yulia City. I might have been able to spare you."

"You're making a world of replicas, aren't you?" Tear shot back coldly. "Then just kill me and make a replica!"

"You insist on fighting me?" he asked, the question was directed solely at the melodist.

"Yes... it's the reason I left Yulia City. I won't let you destroy the Outer Lands!"

"Then I've no choice." Van drew his sword. "I will kill you all!"

Asch was the first to take Van's hit, but Luke and Guy quickly moved in to support him. The older redhead had just gotten his sword up in time, and the speed at which Van was moving startled him. True he had never seen his instructor fighting at full strength, but he didn't think he'd be that powerful.
The battle was moving at amazing speeds, with Van keeping up with all three of his direct assailants. Natalia's shots met nothing but air or the steel blade of her adversary. Though they weren't making any particular progress, so far they were holding their ground. Considering who they were up against, one could consider that a feat in itself, but staying in a stalemate forever meant that Van would emerge victorious. It would give the lands time to fall. No, time was most certainly on Van's side, and he was an opponent that needed no advantages.

Natalia healed a laceration she noticed on her fiancé's arm but left some of the insignificant scratches as they were. As hurried as they had to be, this was likely to be a drawn out battle, and she didn't doubt there would be several more serious injuries involved. Both she and Tear knew that they had to keep up their strength lest they fail when their healing skills were needed most.

However, she did notice a peculiarity to which Van still held. Though he'd said he'd kill them all, he still launched less fierce attacks against Asch than he did Luke or Guy. Natalia wondered what Van had in mind for him. Asch had made clear his decision not to assist Van in his twisted plans, but did that mean that Van had found a way around it? Or did it simply mean he would find a way to force Asch's participation?

Not that such things mattered. She wouldn't allow him the chance for either option. His plans ended here and now.

Asch parried a hit from his former instructor, the force of the attack sending him slightly off balance, but rather than take advantage of this, Van turned his focus to Luke landing a series of hits that his sibling managed to block. What was he thinking? That was the third time now that Van had forced him to drop his guard but he still had yet to take advantage of the openings. Van wasn't stupid, he knew they were there. What was he hoping to gain?

The redhead relaunched his assault on Van's turned back but the Commandant easily side-stepped his move and retaliated. Asch stared down his former teacher, trying to gauge his expression. It had shifted from the calm determined one he wore while fighting to one filled with intrigue. He landed several hits, all light and quick, almost as if gauging his student's reactions. Damn it, what did Van take him for? He wasn't that weak! This wasn't some stupid practice session! Asch's hits grew more intense and Van easily threw them aside. A dark light appeared in his eyes; it had finally clicked.

An evil look spread across Van's face and suddenly his sword plunged forward at Asch. The redhead quickly parried, but was a split second too late and the sword dug painfully into his left arm sending blood spattering onto the floor as he reeled back in pain. What the- All fight Van had obviously been trying to spare him... but that strike was meant to be fatal!

"Don't think you can fool me replica," Van spat at the redhead who was still defensively clutching his bleeding arm.

Damn it! Anise joined in the fray, pushing the Commandant away from the injured Luke. How had he figured it out?!

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"Hey, what the hell are you two doing?" Anise demanded. She had turned around in time to see Luke buttoning up Asch's coat, and Asch dawning his replica's.

"Switching," Asch answered simply as he handed Luke his blade. The younger sibling did the same and they both quickly re-equipped themselves.
“But... why?” Anise asked but the question quickly fell from her mind. She shook her head and looked again. She had watched them do it! But both of them might as well have just switched places for all she could tell. They still looked so completely like the other it was unbelievable. Luke had that same almost-cocky look Asch always had, and at the same time Asch’s expression had softened... how did they do that so damn well?!

“You guys,” Guy scolded. “Now is hardly the time.”

“We’re not just doing this for kicks,” Luke said. He’d even switched his tone of voice! Anise yanked on her pigtails.


“Could you two stop that?” Anise asked, her voice strained in frustration. “You’re messing with my head!”

“It’s easier if we do it this way,” Asch explained.

“You intend to try and fool Van?” Jade asked.

“Even you have to have noticed,” Luke pointed out. “Master Van doesn’t take Luke as seriously.”

“At least stop referring to yourself in the third person!” Anise pleaded. This seriously was not the time for them to be destroying her brain cells.

“Sorry Anise,” Asch shrugged. “If it’s easier, just pretend we haven’t switched. We want to use this to our advantage, and given how well Van knows us, we really can’t afford to screw up.”

“Because Van will leave his guard down against Luke?” Natalia inquired.

“Precisely,” Luke answered. Even Natalia was having a hard time watching Luke. He slipped so easily into Asch’s persona it was frightening. “He doesn’t take Luke as seriously because Luke’s younger and not trained as well.”

“His opinion of Luke doesn’t help that, I’m sure,” Jade agreed.

“So I’ll be able to use that to try and get around his defences,” Asch continued.

“Are you sure he won’t notice?” Guy inquired.

“He could,” Luke conceded. “But we need every advantage we can get right now.”

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Anise did her best to hold her ground as both Natalia and Tear focused on cleaning Luke up. It was going to take both of them too. It was really a good thing he’d blocked that hit. She wasn't going to entertain the thought of losing anyone in this fight, or ever for that matter. But damn it all, how had Van figured them out? Sure no one expected it to last forever, but they sure as hell had hoped it would go on for longer than that. Asch hadn't even been able to find a good opening yet!

“Damn it Van!” The real Asch charged his instructor. Their trick may have fallen through but this fight was far from over.

“Did you honestly think I would fall for such a petty trick?” Van asked, indulging his students’ irrational offensive. Asch always had lost his good sense when he thought his replica may be in danger. It was his weakness, couldn’t Asch see that? "That pathetic thing could never amount to
half the talent you have. Just look at it. Completely useless, and long since filled any potential worth it could possess. He'll never amount to anything much less anywhere near what you could possibly be!"

Luke stepped back, still clutching his blood-soaked arm, reeling from the comments his former teacher made. He knew he wasn't as good as Asch was at some things... but he wasn't worthless! He didn't care what Van said, he did have his own abilities and his own talents!

"Shut up!" Asch countered Van's attacks, and he could feel his own strikes grow more and more reckless. Damn it all! Van was pushing his buttons and he knew it, but his reactions had become so instinctive that he couldn't do a thing about it. Van's eyes narrowed as he spotted the opening and a well placed blow sent Asch skidding across the ground leaving a trail of blood behind him.

"Leave Asch alone!" Luke immediately placed himself between Van and his sibling who was still picking himself up off the ground.

"Luke, no!" Tear called after him but to no avail. What was he thinking? His arm was still bleeding! She'd managed to heal up the deeper wound, but with Natalia being forced to tend to the others, namely her injured fiancé, Tear hadn't had the time to finish healing him properly.

"Tch," Van spat staring down the replica that stood in his way. "Do you honestly think you can stop me, you failure? You who has no purpose other than to die."

"I don't need someone like you telling me what my purpose is. You didn't have one for me, then I'll find my own!" Luke yelled back.

Luke felt an explosion of pain fly up his left arm as Van's strike landed heavily over his own blade. He struggled against his instructor, just barely managing to parry each strike. Luke winced, his injury splitting open under the weight of Van's last hit. His instructor's evil grin widened noticing the pain Luke was in. He added weight to his attack.

"Change clothes, pretend all you'd like," Van whispered maliciously as he leaned down over the replica, "but you'll always be a defect, and you will never, never, be equal to your original."

Van leapt back, leaving Jade's arte to hit nothing but air. The Necromancer placed himself between Luke and the Commandant. "I'm afraid I'll have to have you play with me now." Jade launched himself at the man, his spear cleanly meeting Van's weapon, retaliating almost effortlessly in spite of his opponent's blocks. Unlike the redheads, Jade kept his head about him even in the face of the Commandant and matched him blow for blow in a flurry of strikes that could almost be considered graceful.

Tear hurried to Luke's side and continued to repair the damage he had re-incurred. Had they been in any other situation she would have scolded him for his recklessness. But not only was this not the time, she couldn't cut him down for wanting to protect his brother. Even in the middle of a fight to the death, she wished beyond all hope that there was a way to save her own. She would never accept Van's ideals, and she refused to let him have his way, so even though Tear knew what that meant, deep down she didn't want to see her brother die.

With a quick thanks, Tear's charge returned to the battle leaving the melodist to observe the proceedings. Guy had joined in on Jade's assault but Van had broken free and his artes were keeping them both preoccupied. Anise was having little success at getting any of her artes to hit, and Natalia was still busy fixing Asch up across the chamber, though he was almost back on his feet. Van's single hit had done a lot of damage.
They were all starting to wear, Tear noted as she surveyed the battle, trying her hand at an arte that she knew before she even cast, wouldn't land. All she was succeeding in doing was forcing her brother into unnecessary motions, and extra sidestep to dodge, or a defensive arte he wouldn't have otherwise needed. Still, those efforts weren't completely in vain, Van was still taking some damage. He had slowed, maybe not considerably, but to some extent, since the start of their battle.

Wait... slowing down... that gave Tear an idea, one that brought her back to the day this had all begun and it surprised her that she hadn't thought of it sooner.

_Twei Rei Tsuae Croix Ryo Twei Tsuae_

Tear's voice seemed to echo in the vast chamber, drowning out the sounds of battle that had filled his ears. Asch smiled at the melodist's tactics, his grin widening as he watched Van struggling against the effects of her song. No matter how skilled he was, he couldn't dodge a hymn, and he was starting to show it. They were beginning to gain ground, slowly pushing Van back towards the ledge everyone had been keeping their eye on.

Twenty feet... then ten; enough was enough. Several well placed blows sent Van's assailants flying backwards, to recover and fall as they would. Gailardia at the least was out unless Myatearica or the Princess tended to him. But Van cared little about that for now, his focus remained on Asch who looked more than ready to come at him. Such fruitless and misplaced efforts; it almost saddened him to see so much ruined potential. Asch was too soft, too unwilling to make sacrifices. Still, his student had a burst of determination and a stubbornness that wouldn't soon let him back down.

"You don't have what it takes to defeat me," Van declared, staring down his student; his voice cutting through Tear's melody that still hung in the background. "You might have once, but you've grown weak, held back by that dead weight replica you call your sibling and all these other fools. I offered you the chance to be great, to do the right thing and save this doomed existence from its fate... but you chose a meaningless life. You will _never_ make a difference in this world, all for a worthless piece of trash."

'I've had just about enough of this,' Asch stated with an underlying strength to his thoughts that carried through to Luke who was now standing at his side.

'I agree,' Luke returned the sentiment.

'How about we show him how much you 'held me back'?' Asch suggested, his defiance echoing within Luke's soul and putting any possible doubts he had to rest.

'Sounds like a good idea to me.'

Asch looked over at Luke who smirked and gave him a reassuring nod. Luke was behind him all the way, no matter what the final outcome would be. Together, they charged Van.

Tear began to sing again, repeating her melody despite how drained she was. Her breathing had become laboured, but the song remained pure and the lyrics unaffected. She was giving her all, everybody was. Everything they'd worked towards, all the memories they'd shared, the people that had helped them along the way, it all came down to this moment. Every single one of the people Asch now called his friends were behind him, and he had no intention of losing now. Maybe he didn't have the skills to defeat Van, but he wasn't fighting alone anymore.

Asch swung his sword down on his teacher, who neatly blocked it. Luke cut around the side, escaping Van's notice. He felt the doubts begin to creep into his mind, and he moved more
cautiously. The things his teacher had said began to weigh down on him. Did he really have the abilities to do this?

Stupid! Luke shook off those thoughts, letting determination take their place. Now wasn't the time to be doubting himself, or to wallow in self pity. That's what Van wanted him to do; Van had always fostered that sense of inferiority, that he could never quite catch up to Asch, but that didn't matter! He didn't have to better or stronger or anything like that at all. Even if he wasn't as talented as Asch was, it didn't mean he didn't have any ability to start with. So he didn't give a damn what Van thought of him, or what he said! Luke knew he had a place in this world and it wasn't as that man's throw-away.

Van turned his head in spite of being pinned under Asch's sword and quickly found the replica he had lost track of. Then again, the thing's position was irrelevant; trash like that would make no difference. There was nothing of which it was capable that he couldn't deal with, and the look he gave it made that fact crystal clear. Luke met his stare with an unwavering gaze, a flare of defiance burning within his eyes.

"Asch!" Luke launched his blade into the air.

Van's eyes widened at the unexpected tactic and he forced his student back. Asch snatched the sword from midair spinning around and landing a hit that Van instinctively parried, but his reflexes were still sluggish from his sister's continued singing and with the unforeseen strategy catching him off guard, he couldn't properly adjust. The second sword easily broke through Van's defences and plunged through his abdomen. Asch yanked the blade out spattering blood and other fluids on the floor, his cold green eyes proclaiming their victory.

"You can hate Luke, put him down all you want," Asch said coldly. "But that so-called 'worthless' replica was enough to stop you. I chose my path, and I do not regret it."

Van dropped his sword, the sound of metal cutting through Tear's hymn and bringing an eerie silence to the room. He clutched the fatal wound, reeling back from the hit until he was dangerously close to the edge.

"You're a fool," Van said through laboured breaths, his blue eyes locked on Asch's own emerald. "A fool... following a worthless replica to the end. This world... will never change."

Van took one more step backwards, and plummeted off the cliff.

Everyone was silent. Both redheads remained fixed where they were, staring at the spot where their former teacher has just stood, perhaps offering their last respects. No one would ever be sure. Asch was the first to move, turning his back to the battlefield and walking away. He had the right idea, Jade sighed. They still had a job to do.

"Tear..." Natalia motioned towards the melodist who stood in seeming disbelief of the scene she had just witnessed. Of course, she had just lost the last of her family, she must be devastated. Guy held up his hand, and shook his head, telling her not to go any further. Perhaps he was right... Natalia gave her friend one last look but followed the others towards the passage ring.

Luke lingered a moment longer, picking up Van's sword from the ground. It shone in the soft light of the passage ring, and even though the blood that still lingered on its edges spoke of the atrocities it had seen, Tear could feel her heart in her throat. She had never really wanted to see him- Luke stuck the sword in the ground, one last tribute to the man that had fallen here.

It didn't feel real, none of it did. The entire world around her seemed so foreign as Tear stood there,
the golden gleam of Van's sword entrancing her. The brother she'd always looked up to, had always respected was gone. She'd never see his smile again, feel the warmth of his hand as he placed it gently over her head, listen to his gentle voice as he sang her to sleep. And for what? Necessity meant nothing anymore, not when she was alone in the world.

Tear felt a hand on her shoulder and looked up to see Luke smiling at her. It wasn't a happy victorious grin, but a soft smile reflecting the anguish of losing someone who had been important to him once too. Seeing Luke brought her back to reality, though she couldn't find it in her to return his gesture. They had a task they still had to complete. After all the sacrifices that had been made along the way, they couldn't fail now.

"Are you going to be alright, Tear?" Natalia inquired as the melodist took her usual place near the pedestal. "You look quite worn out already."

Tear merely nodded; she didn't trust her voice not to fail her. Clutching the pedestal and activating the passage ring, she felt her strength begin to drain, but she wouldn't back down. For Van's sake as well, she would ensure this world lived on, until the day she joined him again.

"So what are we doing to lower the land?" Luke asked, breaking the silence and trying to hurry things along as best he could. Tear couldn't be having an easy time, but this was also the one place they couldn't afford to screw up.

"First off, you need to connect the last Sephiroth to the Absorption Gate," Jade instructed. "Once the Radiation Gate is connected, you'll need to send Seventh Fonons into the Sephiroth. That will trigger the decent. However, those Seventh Fonons have to come from the one who issued the command, so in other words, you."


Luke raised both his arms and a familiar golden glow enveloped him. He closed his eyes, stabilizing the fonons he'd gathered that threatened to overcome him in his weariness. Luke hadn't noticed just how exhausted he was until he had to use his hyperresonance. With a deep breath, he went back to the task at hand, carving the connection between this passage ring and the Radiation Gate. He couldn't give up now... he couldn't fail. Everyone had sacrificed too much, Tear had even lost her brother. He had to do this.

The Seventh Fonons moved into the core and the whole chamber shook. The lands were beginning to lower but the more Seventh Fonons that passed from Luke into the Sephiroth, the more they took his strength with them. No! He couldn't pass out now... but he just didn't have the strength left! If he didn't keep up his hyperresonance then... then the lands would... everyone would...

Luke felt a gentle pressure on his left shoulder and turned his head to see Asch smiling at him. The older redhead turned to face the same direction as his sibling and raised his left arm. The golden glow that had enveloped Luke spread to encompass Asch as well. He slowly moved his right hand up Luke's left arm, and while carefully maintaining the flow of fonons, he brought it down by their sides adding his own hyperresonance to Luke's.

Jade sighed but couldn't resist the smile that tugged at his lips. Really those two... wasn't Asch listening when he'd said the fonons had to come from Luke? Of course, it was completely irrelevant; having identical fonon frequencies meant that the Sephiroth likely couldn't tell the difference between them. Then there was their combined hyperresonance. Asch had done an impressive job of balancing the focal point and Jade suspected the fact that Asch still held Luke's free arm was helping stabilize the fonon flow between them. Normally he wouldn't have thought such a thing even possible but apparently he had been wrong. Still... did Asch really have to pick
the most crucial times to test these sorts of things?

Natalia watched the boys in awe, but found something peaceful about their cooperative effort. It seemed so fitting after all they'd been through that they finish it together. Come to think of it, none of them had ever actually seen Asch use his hyperresonance before, and yet, as he stood there with Luke it seemed perfectly normal. Then again, a great many things she would have otherwise considered strange had become normal as of late. The cavern shook again, they must be almost done.

Luke smiled as he felt Asch's strength alongside his own, bringing with it a warmth and comfort that had escaped him with Van's death. Everyone had lost so much, but they had also saved so much, and that knowledge made it easier. Things gone would never come back, he had learnt that in Akzeriuth; but no matter what the past held, there was always a future, one full of infinite possibilities. Luke felt Asch smile when he came to that realization. They both knew it, and they would both protect it as best as they could.

"It appears the miasma is adhering to the dividing line just as we had expected," Jade commented. The cavern gave one last solid quaver, signalling the completion of the descent.

Asch and Luke let a sigh of relief and satisfaction but before either of them could dissipate the fonons around them, a searing pain flew through their heads and brought them both to their knees. Lorelei?

*Luke, Asch... I will send you the key. Use it to set me free... the one who would seize glory... is trying... to capture me...*

The pain vanished in an instant leaving both twins gasping for air, fighting against the darkness that beckoned them. What was that supposed to be? Just what was- Both twins found their thoughts jumbled and struggled to make sense of Lorelei's words. No, they had to stay conscious. There would be time to rest later... not now.

"Are the two of you alright?" Natalia inquired worriedly.

"I'm sure they're fine," Jade answered for the redheads as they continued to try and control their laboured breathing. "With the number of Seventh Fonons the descent required, it's no surprise they're tired. They'll be right as rain after a bit of rest."

"How about you Tear?" Anise asked, walking over to the melodist who had just released the pedestal.

"I think I'll..." Tear couldn't even finish lying before a dizzy spell silenced her. She was already swaying on her feet.

"Here," Anise offered with a smile. "Luke's too wiped to carry you. I know it's not as good, but you can borrow Tokunaga."

Tear leaned against the enlarged doll and smiled a warm smile as she cuddled closer. "Thank you...Anise," she managed before giving into her weariness.

"Wow, that took quite the toll on everyone," Guy commented, eyeing the unconscious Tear and the two boys who weren't far from joining her.

"Indeed," Natalia agreed. "But the lands have been safely lowered, they'll have plenty of time to rest. Everything is finally over now."
Asch looked over at Luke, who returned the worried stare. Lorelei’s words still echoed in their minds. Natalia was wrong, it only seemed that way. Things were far from over.

They were only just beginning.
The morning sun streamed in through the windows lighting up the castle's grand entrance hall and bathing the guards who stood dutifully at their posts. Natalia stood alone, gazing upon it all, drinking in the serenity of the morning before the hustle and bustle of the day began. It had been almost two months now since she and her companions had lowered the Outer Lands safely into the Qliphoth, and thankfully they'd yet to encounter any unforeseen consequences. Life, as it seemed, had returned to normal.

Sadly, affairs at the castle were still far from even remotely resembling normal. There were so many people hurrying about during the days, that the otherwise grand building seemed almost suffocating. It was no surprise, the entire world had gone through a major upheaval, and its echoes were still being felt by a great many regions. Not only had the lands been lowered, but a halt had been put to all Score readings. It didn't need to be said that most of the common-folk were rather uneasy, but it was something that needed to be done. The fall of the Outer Lands was not within the Score, making any subsequent readings inaccurate, even if one were to forget the chances that the Score may actually lead to destruction. And... if such a knowledge were to get out, it would cause unimaginable panic. But Ion, bless him, had taken that problem by the reigns, and Natalia was certain he had many consequences to deal with as a result. Their fight was over, but their respective tasks still weren't quite complete.

"Good morning Asch!" Natalia caught her fiancé as he walked through the doors, his younger brother in tow. Asch must have some sort of meeting today, Natalia smiled as she noted the formal clothes he was wearing. His long red hair was pulled back and bound, and he looked so very dashing. Like a future king; Natalia giggled.

"Good morning Natalia," both siblings replied.

"Good morning to you as well, Luke," the Princess added with a smile. It wasn't a surprise to see him accompanying Asch, though he lacked the formal wear his sibling was in; it seemed that Luke had made a habit of tagging along these days. It was quite nice; he didn't seem nearly as awkward or out of place here as he once had, and why should he? It was as much his place as it was Asch's or her's.

"Sorry we can't stay and chat, but I've got a meeting to get to," Asch explained apologetically. "I'll catch up with you later."

"Don't worry, Father said he'll wait for you to arrive!" Natalia called after him.

"Thanks Natalia!" he called back with a wave and began up the stairs, Luke hurrying after him with a wave of his own.

Natalia watched as the two continued up the stairs until they reached the second level where Luke turned off, leaving Asch to continue upwards towards the meeting rooms. They parted without a word, but the smile on Luke's face as he moved down the hall towards the library told her something had passed between them.

True to her word, Natalia had said nothing about their connection or their ability to create a hyperresonance. Even if she'd had the slightest inclination to do so, she knew she couldn't have. Asch had more than enough to deal with it as it was. The recent passage of his birthday had only served as a reminder of how quickly time was passing and between the fall of the lands, the peace treaty with Malkuth and the usual duties that accompanied the new year; there was no shortage of
Affairs at the castle were busier than ever, and Asch was more involved than ever before. It was only two years now before he would come of age, and with her father getting older it was no surprise that more and more responsibilities were falling to Asch. It really wouldn't be all that long before the two of them would be expected to take the throne.

Natalia sighed sadly as she watched her fiancé climb the last stairs, his sword bouncing at his side. It truly was an interesting blade and while Asch never seemed to let it out of his sight, Natalia couldn't for the life of her recall where he'd picked it up. She remembered him having it upon their return from the Absorption Gate but beyond that she couldn't recall. It certainly bore a strange resemblance to the Order of Lorelei's crest in its design; perhaps he had acquired it in Daath. Peculiar or not, Natalia quickly dismissed it. It wasn't as if he and Luke hadn't gone through half a dozen swords over the course of their journey with the sheer amount of battle and wear they put them through, and Asch's choice of weapon was really the least of her concerns.

The young Princess couldn't wait for the days when all would start to settle down and things would return to normal; both at the castle and in their lives. Lately Asch always seemed so tired and almost distracted. His attention never seemed to be on the task at hand, always on some other, unknown problem. Oh, she was being foolish, with all the things he had to tend to lately, of course he was busy thinking of other things. Still it concerned her; it wasn't unusual to have Asch worrying about things, but he hadn't really seemed himself of late. Natalia had tried asking Luke about it, but while he had noticed the same thing, he couldn't provide any more insight into the matter.

What Natalia had noticed, but that she certainly wouldn't say to her younger cousin, was that he seemed to be sharing a similar problem. She couldn't help but smile at Luke's efforts over the past couple months. He followed Asch around like a lost puppy, often taking to the library while Asch was in various meetings to which he wasn't privy. It didn't bother her as much as it had when they were younger. She used to hate it when Luke was up at the castle; she felt as if Luke was trying to take him away from her. No, perhaps hate wasn't the proper word; she had been jealous, perhaps even territorial to some extent, and she certainly hadn't given him a chance. Now such petty feelings didn't even register, and watching Luke try so dutifully to fit into his role as nobility was heart warming.

But if there was one thing that Natalia had discovered, it was this: that role didn't make Luke happy.

As soon as they had returned, Guy had resigned his position as Luke and Asch's attendant, opting to return with Jade to Grand Chokmah. It came as no surprise, Guy was Malkuth nobility after all, there was no purpose in him remaining a servant in her uncle's house; but it had been a harsh blow to Luke. They'd known it was coming, but she suspected that a part of Luke had hoped he'd stay. The two still remained in touch through letters, but it wasn't the same thing.

Natalia could relate, she did miss her chats with Tear and would love to see the others again, but she was busy enough with her own duties that she didn't have much time to dwell on it. Luke on the other hand, was really feeling the loss of their friends, and while he did write to them and had received a few replies, he was still quite lonely.

He didn't belong here.

For the first time, Natalia didn't feel that out of spite or resentment, but rather as a realization of an almost heart-breaking truth. Luke had been so happy out in the world, seeing the beauties it had to offer, meeting different people, and visiting different places. This life was nothing more than a
cage, and while it may be filled with the people he cared for, it was a prison none the less.

Luke didn't belong in this life; but knowing that, Natalia couldn't help but wonder exactly where it was he fit in this world.

Luke closed the book before him with a defeated sigh. Nothing in there that he didn't already know. Lorelei was proving to be the most frustrating thing to research ever! Well not that he'd ever researched... well anything before, but Luke was sure it couldn't be this difficult! Ion had even tried to help by sending him some books from Daath on the Seventh Fonon but none of them did anything more than speculate about Lorelei's existence. The most success he'd had was reading the legends concerning the being in question and Yulia; but in the end, they were still just that: legends, and he couldn't substantiate anything they said.

The young redhead picked up the next book from his pile and began to leaf through it. He'd read this one before, and like all the others, it didn't say a damn thing about Lorelei. At least not anything useful, or that could help him and Asch figure out the problem at hand.

Luke, Asch... I will send you the key. Use it to set me free... the one who would seize glory... is trying... to capture me...

Luke glanced down and noticed he'd stopped on a page describing the Sword and Jewel of Lorelei. His finger subconsciously traced the shape of the Sword; he knew it well, after all, it had found itself a permanent home in Asch's scabbard. The artist of the book had been pretty accurate, but they were still a bit off, it didn't curve quite so sharply near the blade like that.

Luke's hand moved from the Sword to the Jewel. He wondered if the artist had made any mistakes drawing it like they had with the Sword. Luke had no idea, they didn't have the Jewel to compare... or to be more precise, he didn't have the Jewel.

It was the second half of the Key of Lorelei that said being had told them he was sending. They weren't going to be getting very far without it; the Sword was useless as the Key without the Jewel inlaid in it. There was no way Lorelei missed that fact. He had sent the Jewel... and Luke had failed to get it somehow.

Asch would never say it, but Luke knew it had to be the case. It had come up through another Sephiroth, Lorelei still held onto it... those were just excuses Asch used to make him feel better. Luke knew perfectly well it was his fault they didn't have the Jewel, so he was determined to do something about it. Unfortunately his attempts to research were getting him nowhere, but at least it took some work off of Asch's plate.

The missing Jewel of Lorelei wasn't their only problem, and unfortunately Asch was so swamped with work that there was very little time for them to try and figure out the rest of Lorelei's message. The one who would seize glory... Vandesdelca... Master Van was still alive, and there was no saying what he was up to. Lorelei had said something about Van trying to capture him, but what did that mean? Was there even a way to trap a being made of fonons? If so, how? And what could they do to stop it when Master Van was probably in the core?

There were just too many questions, and here in Baticul, neither of them were finding any kind of answer. Luke didn't dare ask any of his friends for help. Jade might be able to give some ideas, but even he had admitted to knowing next to nothing about Lorelei, and Luke knew he and Asch couldn't drag them all into their mess again. Even Ion... Luke had only asked if Ion could send him
some books on the Seventh Fonon and Ion's eagerness to help him out made Luke feel guilty for
lying to his friend. Stil, Luke was determine not to get them involved again, they had all risked too
much last time.

The door to the library opened, startling Luke who was staring aimlessly at the drawings in the text
before him. He slammed it shut in surprise only to see Asch with a satisfied grin on his face. He
should have known Asch would try and scare the living daylights out of him. Well, Luke knew he
had it coming; it wouldn't have been the first time if Asch had come in and found him asleep over a
book.

"Make any progress?" His sibling inquired.

"A whole lot of nothing," Luke sighed in defeat as he returned the tomes to their respective shelves,
and gathering the few he had to return to Ion at some point. Maybe he should write the Fon Master
another letter... but he still hadn't gotten an answer from the last one, and Ion was probably really
busy. He didn't want to be a bother.

Luke followed his brother out of the library in silence. He found his eyes kept wandering towards
the sword at Asch's side, and while he tried to force himself not to look, it did nothing for the
tendril guilt that curled up around his throat. If only he'd been stronger... or been paying more
attention... or something! Why did he have to fail at such an important time? Why didn't he get the
Jewel like he was supposed to?

The two of them left the castle, escaping into the afternoon sun. Though it was still winter, the air
was mild, and the light of the sun had erased almost all of the snow that had settled over the
capital. Spring was just around the corner now, and the weather was showing it. Luke sighed and
found himself wondering if spring ever came to Keterburg, or if a place like Chesedonia ever saw
snow. Thinking about those places saddened him for some reason and Luke let go of the train of
thought. He had things to do here. Baticul was his home... so why did he always find himself
dreaming of everywhere but?

Asch surprised Luke by sitting down at the fountain in the middle of the giant courtyard that led up
to the castle and Luke silently sat down next to him, returning to thoughts Luke himself couldn't
even identify. The two sat in silence for a long time.

"You're not happy here," Asch finally stated.

"What are you talking about? Of course I'm happy here!" Luke was taken aback by Asch's sudden
accusation, but even he could tell his protest lacked the conviction it should have. "This is home...
how could I not be happy?"

Asch simply smiled, an understanding but almost sad smile that made the guilt that had settled in
Luke earlier grow exponentially. Was...was it really that obvious? No! No! He wasn't upset about
being here! He still had Mother and Father and Asch and...

"It's okay, Luke," Asch said softly. "I know this kind of life doesn't suit you, you don't have to be
ashamed of that."

"I'm sorry..." Luke looked down guiltily, unable to look Asch straight in the eye.

The older redhead shook his head. He had noticed how quiet and almost withdrawn Luke had
become over the past couple months. Oh he put on a good front, but deep down, he was bored with
the day to day comings and goings at the castle, and above all else, he was lonely. Asch knew he
hadn't had the time to spend with Luke that he'd have liked, and while he was eternally grateful for
the work Luke had been doing, both to help him with his duties and to figure out the issues with Van and Lorelei, it wasn't fair to his little brother. Knowing all that made it easy to figure out what had to happen next.

"I think you should go visit everyone and see how they're doing," Asch suggested.

Luke looked up in surprise, "What?"

"I already spoke with Mother and Father about it, I think it would be good for you to get out of the city and spend some time with everyone. Everything is so crazy around here that you're getting lost in the shuffle and it's not fair to you. This way, by the time you come back, things should have settled down a bit and it will be easier for you to fit yourself in."

"But what about the Jewel and Lorelei and-"

Asch held up a hand, cutting Luke off. "Don't worry about that, I'll keep working on it. You just go and enjoy yourself. Give everyone my best," he finished with a smile.

Asch was caught off guard when Luke took him in his arms. "Thank you," Luke whispered, his voice almost apologetic. He should have known Asch would understand. After a moment Asch returned the gesture.

"Just promise me something," Asch said as the two separated.

"What's that?" Luke asked curiously.

"That you'll come back home. Preferably in one piece."

"You know I will," Luke answered with a mischievous grin.

"Yeah well, don't make me come get you this time."

"Don't worry about me," Luke said standing up and turning about, offering one last grateful smile to his older sibling.

"I know my way home."
The sun shone brightly overhead, casting its light against the auburn cliffs that broke the horizon. Only a handful of passengers disembarked at Sheridan's small port, but among them were Luke with a small blue cheagle in tow. The others quickly dispersed, either catching a coach to the city or meeting up with family or friends. The young noble debated the coach option but decided he could use the air and time to think. The road to Sheridan wasn't all that dangerous or difficult anyway, not since all the extra soldiers had been stationed here. They had Master Van to thank for that.

"Master! Wait for me!" Mieu bounced along, scurrying in his attempts to follow Luke's quick pace.

"Sorry Mieu." Luke smiled apologetically at the young cheagle. "I'd like to get there before sundown; you can ride on my shoulder if I'm going too fast for you."

The small creature wasted no time taking him up on that offer, but decided on Luke's head rather than his shoulder. He knew the odds of getting kicked off were far less if he wasn't perched next to Luke's ear. "Thank you!" He squeaked happily.

"No problem," Luke muttered as if having been pulled from a train of thought.

"Master, what's the matter?"

"Hm?" Luke broke free of whatever ideas had ensnared him. "Nothing's wrong, why do you ask?"

"Well... didn't you tell Asch we were going to visit our friends? Why are we here?"

Luke bit his lip; so much for hoping it would escape Mieu's notice. He knew full well that he'd said he was going to visit the others and check on them, but how could Asch honestly think he could just drop everything like that and go play around? He wanted to go see them, Guy, Tear, Ion... and everyone. He longed to visit and chat with them like he once had; but now wasn't the time. There was too much else going on for him to just pretend none of it existed. The young noble just couldn't bring himself to ignore the problems they both had to face, so he was going to continue his research and keep trying to figure out the mystery that was Lorelei and what Master Van was up to, even if it meant he'd lied to Asch.

He had failed to get the Jewel... it was his responsibility to find it.

"And what about Ginji and everyone in Sheridan? They'd be pretty upset to hear you say that," Luke teased.

"Oh no! I didn't mean it like that!" Luke smiled as the cheagle continued to fret. Chatting with Mieu was a good way to keep his guilt from getting a good grip on him, and once he'd managed to reassure the small creature that no one in Sheridan would be offended, they succeeded in having a rather interesting conversation.

Sheridan slowly crept closer as the two continued to chatter, talking about pointless things, oddities Mieu had noticed around the manor. Luke couldn't help but laugh at Mieu's tales of his days fleeing the overbearing maids. Apparently they were worse than Tear when it came to loving cute things, or maybe they just didn't hide it, but either way it left Mieu as the victim of cuddling abuse... if such a thing even existed. Luke sighed at that thought. Tear...

He'd received a few letters from the melodist, which of course really told him nothing about herself
or how she was faring. Through their correspondence he was slowly teaching Tear the difference between a letter to a friend and to her superior, but in spite of his efforts, he was still getting reports. Not that she’d likely tell him how her illness was faring if he was speaking to her in person, much less put it into writing. Still, her evasiveness of the topic when he’d clearly asked, told him far more than he really wanted to know. The world was saved, but she was still paying the price.

Before Luke had the time to change his mind, and thus his destination, he found himself knocking on the door to Sheridan's meeting hall. The door cracked open and he was greeted by a familiar smiling face.

"Luke! What a surprise!"

"Hi Noelle," Luke returned the gesture and accepted the pilot's invitation inside. "Sorry to drop by unannounced."

"Don't be silly!" the young pilot immediately dismissed his apology. "You're welcome here anytime. Besides, all these guys are doing is arguing. I could use someone civil to talk to."

Luke snickered at the sight of Class I and Aston all leaning over some plans at the far end of the table. He could definitely see what Noelle meant.

"Come on now Aston," Hencken argued. "If we're going to rebuild it, we may as well make some improvements to the core system. Why bother recreating a piece of junk when it could be something great?"

"I'm telling you, it doesn't need any improvements!" Aston shot back. "That was already the pinnacle of Class M's achievements. Your modifications will just slow the operating system!"

"But its accuracy will be ten-fold! If that's all Class M has, then it's a good thing we're here to help!" Cathy threw in.

"How long have they been at it?" Luke whispered.

"Hours," Noelle answered and both of them laughed.

"Say, Noelle, is Spinoza still around Sheridan?"

"Yeah, he's been talking about moving back to Belkend now that Van's gone, but he hasn't done it yet. I think he likes the energy."

Luke laughed, "I get it, but I don't."

"Same here, I can only take so much of this at once."

"Do you know where I'd find him?" the young noble inquired.

"Sure, I'll show you the way."

"Thanks Noelle."

"No problem!"

Luke and Mieu both followed the blonde pilot through Sheridan. Luke was overjoyed to see the repairs that had taken place over the past couple months. The mourning city had almost regained its former vigour and life was slowly returning. Sheridan was healing... but it wasn't just them, the entire world was recovering from the upheaval it had been put through. Luke hadn't thought about
it at the time, because all that had mattered was keeping everyone alive, but there had been more than a few drastic repercussions of their actions in lowering the Outer Lands.

Spinoza's makeshift office was in a building not far from the Albiore's hangars and Noelle cheerfully greeted the aging researcher before introducing her guest.

"Luke! What brings you all the way out here? Last I heard you and Asch were busy as bees in Baticul."

"We were, or I guess Asch still is; I came because there are some important things I wanted to talk to you about."

"I'll just wait over here," Noelle smiled apologetically, indicating the next room. She could tell from Luke's tone it was probably something private or at the very least personal; and it wasn't any of her business.

"Thanks Noelle," Luke nodded, a grateful expression dawning on his face. "I can find my way back; you don't have to wait on me."

"I don't mind, like I said, I need a break from those three, so just take your time," Then, without another word, she left the room, a blue cheagle happily cuddled in her arms. Luke grinned; one more person to add to the list of people Mieu might have to watch out for.

"She's a real sweetheart that one," Spinoza commented.

Luke stuttered a little, unsure how to respond to the researcher's unexpected comment, but Spinoza simply chuckled at the reaction he'd incited. "So, what is it you wanted to talk about?"

"Dr. Spinoza, how much do you know about Lorelei?"

A serious air fell over the researcher. "Not much I'm afraid; there is very little known about Lorelei. If the two of you weren't proven to be isofons of Lorelei and hadn't had that encounter with him, I'd say he's entirely theoretical. I do have a couple books that may give you some more information," Spinoza continued, handing the young noble a couple of texts. "But I'm afraid that's all I can offer."

"I've read these already." Luke handed both books back, "there's a copy of them in the castle library."

"Why the sudden concern with Lorelei? Are you and Asch having problems?"

"Well, not problems per say..." Luke launched into an explanation of Lorelei's predicament and the Sword that Asch had been given. He was careful to exclude Lorelei's exact message and the parts about Master Van... instead dwelling on his failure to receive the Jewel for longer than he probably should have. "I just don't understand," he finally concluded, a melancholy settling over the previously cheerful replica. His eyes met those of the man before him, almost pleading for an answer. "We're both perfect isofons of Lorelei, so why did Asch get the Sword but I didn't get the Jewel?"

"Well, it's the fact that you're perfect isofons that allowed Lorelei to send you something in the first place. I can't think of any reason for one of you to receive the item but the other to fail unless there was some kind of mistake or distraction on the part of-"

Spinoza cut himself off but he could tell by the look on Luke's face he'd already put his foot in his mouth and the young replica had gotten the gist of it. He cursed his tendency to ponder things
aloud. But really, what other options were there unless... no. The implications of the second option were almost crueller.

"Really Luke," Spinoza tried. "It isn't your fault. I doubt anything you could have done would have changed matters or affected the outcome."

Nothing.

"So... Luke," the researcher decided on a different tactic. Distractions could work wonders. "What do you think about the recent changes in the Planet Storm?"

"What changes?" the redhead looked up at him confusedly, his face beset with even more concern then before. Strike two.

"Haven't you heard? I'm sure I sent a letter to you and Asch as well as one to your father informing you of the matter. Even if they went astray, the countries' leaders should know; everyone has been monitoring the Planet Storm to watch for any effects from the lowering of the lands."

"No... no one's told me anything."


No answer. Of course he was asleep, Luke rolled his eyes but quickly sighed in defeat. It was late... but Asch had some explaining to do in the morning. Why hadn't his sibling said anything?

"Why? What's going on with the Planet Storm?" Luke finally asked.

"It has increased in intensity. Rumour has it that investigations to the Absorption and Radiation Gates showed signs of others having been there, but I've no one who can confirm that."

"The God-Generals!" Luke suddenly concluded. He should have known there weren't just going to give up because they believed Master Van was dead. "What kind of consequences could the increased force of the Planet Storm have?"

"Right now, my biggest concern is the miasma. It was trapped in the core but with more fonons being forced through there, the chances are much greater that it may begin seeping back out. There are other more long term consequences depending on whether the velocity continues to increase or not. If the vibrations caused by the Planet Storm continue to grow at the rate they have, then the Tartarus won't be able to neutralize the vibrations in the core anymore."

"That's terrible!"

"I'm not entirely certain of this; to be honest I would have like to have spoken to Colonel Curtis about it."

"Can you write your theories down?" Luke asked.

"I could, why?"

"I'll bring them to Grand Chokmah and have Jade look them over. There are a few things I'd like to ask him too."

"Certainly," Spinoza nodded. "I'll get that done tonight. Are you sure about going all the way to Grand Chokmah?"

"Yeah, I was heading there anyway," Luke lied. Well it wasn't entirely a lie. He had said he'd go
visit his friends, and he did have friends in Grand Chokmah... The young noble opened the door to the office allowing himself and the researcher out.

"Going to Grand Chokmah?" Noelle asked with a smile, enjoying the confused looks she got. "Sorry, you guys were getting loud."


"Do you need a ride?"

"In the Albiore?"

"No, I have my own personal ferry we can sail in," Noelle shot back tauntingly.


"Is it okay if we head out first thing in the morning?"

"Of course," Luke answered, taken aback by the fact that the perky pilot had even considered departing tonight as an option. Now that he was out of the office, he could see why Asch was asleep; the sun had long since disappeared from the horizon.

"I'll see you in the morning." Noelle smiled, passing the redhead a sleeping blue cheagle.

"I'll make sure to have what you need by the morning then," Spinoza stated with certainty.

"Thanks," Luke replied. "Sorry to put you to work so late at night."

"No, I should apologize for dragging you into these affairs again." Luke simply shook his head. "Really Luke, it isn't your fault." Spinoza offered one final smile before returning to his office.

The young noble watched him and wondered if he was really that easy to read. The lack of the Jewel still weighed heavily on his mind and the researcher's apology only intensified the guilt that was starting to brew within him. They weren't getting him involved; it was the other way around. They were his friends; the last thing he wanted was to see them hurt in his mess.

And there was no saying just how dangerous this journey was going to get.

The several day trip to Grand Chokmah from Sheridan with Noelle was fun, and Luke thoroughly enjoyed the chance to catch up with the blonde pilot. The Albiore seemed freakishly quiet with just the two of them (three if you counted Mieu), and to be honest it was kind of nerve-wracking. The fact that he hadn't managed to contact Asch didn't help much in that regard. Luke cursed the ridiculous schedule his brother was forced to adhere to. Asch really hadn't been kidding when he said he'd be busy for the next little while. Thankfully, he and Noelle managed to fill the silence with conversation and Luke was glad to hear things in Sheridan had been lively as ever and that Ginji was doing well. Still, the young noble was relieved when they finally touched down in a field just shy of Malkuth's capital.

"Are you sure you don't want to come?" Luke asked.

"That's okay," the pilot replied with her usual degree of seemingly eternal cheer. "I'll wait for you here."

"Alright," Luke called back with a wave. "I shouldn't be too late!"
Noelle's reply was lost in the morning breeze and Luke continued to walk towards the sparkling city in the distance. Even from this far away, you could see the glimmer as the sun danced off the endlessly flowing water upon which the capital dwelt. But the glittering white marble was broken by three figures rapidly approaching him, and it didn't take a genius to identify them as members of the military. The way their strides were all in unison gave them away long before their uniforms were visible.

What did catch Luke off guard was the way the three of them immediately broke their formation and surrounded him.

"What's going on?" Luke asked as calmly as he could, instinctively taking a defensive stance.

"You're under arrest; you are to come quietly or we will restrain you by force."

"What? On what charges? I haven't done anything! I'm just going to Grand Chokmah to visit a friend."

"Your lies won't fool us! You are clearly a high ranking Kimlascan. All spies will face inquisition before the court to be tried as his Majesty sees fit."

"I'm not a spy!" Luke yelled in outrage, but he may as well be arguing with a wall. The three men surrounding him looked more eager to fight him than to back down. 'Tried' his foot! They wanted to take him out here and now despite their orders, they just needed an excuse. Figures. What worried Luke more was why the military believed that Kimlasca would be sending spies. This wasn't like during the war... they had a peace treaty!

"You're clearly not planning on coming along quietly," the leader of the soldiers declared, a smug grin spreading across his face as he drew his blade. Luke cursed under his breath; this was the worst possible situation he could get himself into. The other two soldiers drew their swords as well. With a nod from the leader, all three attacked. Luke dodged their hits, fighting against his own instincts to draw his blade. He couldn't; he had his position to consider after all. He may not be as high ranking as Asch was, but he knew full well there was no way he could get caught attacking Malkuth soldiers in their own territory and not cause problems. They had finally managed to form a tenuous peace between the countries, and it was far too fragile to test now. Damn it all!

The soldiers who had challenged him didn't prove to be exceptionally skilled and Luke caught himself critiquing their form, it distracted him, but noting their weaknesses helped him avoid their continuing assault. Now if only there weren't three of them he could probably keep this up. Still, he couldn't do this indefinitely, and the soldiers were getting more aggressive, angry that he was mocking them by dodging their attacks. Honestly, Luke rolled his eyes, you'd think they expect him to stand there and be impaled. The young noble sidestepped another strike, reading these three was easy. Wait! One... two... Where was the third?

Damn it!

The sound of metal on metal rang out and Luke was forced to draw his sword to save the arm he might have otherwise lost. Of all the... why was simply visiting Jade so difficult? That man's attitude managed to seep into absolutely everything involving him in some way and it was far too easy for Luke to picture Jade snickering in his office.

Now that his sword was out, the soldiers were even less of a challenge and the redhead was easily matching their strikes, all the while trying to figure out what to do. No doubt if he surrendered
they'd claim he attacked them first and his word didn't mean much. Killing them was absolutely out of the question, but maybe if he knocked them out their memory could be considered questionable? That was the best thing he could come up with.

"What's going on over here?" Luke cursed again. A fourth voice and the sound of a sword being unsheathed... just what he needed. In a swift motion, the young noble disarmed and threw back all three of his opponents, throwing himself around in time to meet his newest opponent's strike. Time froze as Luke found himself looking past steel blades into a pair of very familiar blue eyes.

"Guy!"

"Luke!" Both combatants lowered their weapons. "What in all of Auldrant are you doing here? And what's going on?"

"I was just coming to visit and to talk to Jade about something but I was attacked by the soldiers here."

"He is obviously a high-ranking Kimlascan!" The soldier's leader argued, doing his best to keep face after his humiliating defeat. "Orders are that he is to be detained. No exceptions!"

"Then I'll take him into my custody," Guy replied. "You'll come with me, right Luke?" The noble nodded, still completely lost as to what was going on around him. "Is that suitable?"

"Yes, Sir," the soldier grumbled in agreement before retreating with his companions.

"I swear all the new recruits are nothing but glory hogs," Guy muttered under his breath. "Sorry Luke, looks like you're going to have to come to the palace with me. We'll get things sorted out with His Majesty there."

"That's fine," Luke answered still watching the soldiers retreating in the distance. "But what's all this about in the first place? Why are Kimlascans being treated like enemies and potential spies?"

"You mean... you don't know?"

"I don't know what?"

"If you don't know anything about it, then maybe it's best you come to the palace after all. Come on, let's go."

Luke nodded and followed his best friend, all the joy he had found in their reunion completely overshadowed by the looming thoughts that wouldn't loosen their hold on him. After everything he'd gone through over the past couple months, there was still so much he didn't know and didn't understand... and he hated it.

What was Asch hiding from him now?

The floating city of Grand Chokmah was as majestic as Luke remembered it being and his initial apprehension about his less than warm reception slowly abated as he caught up with his best friend. Luke hadn't realized just how much he had missed his former attendant until the two of them got talking. Talking with Guy lifted such a huge weight from his chest, and Luke was genuinely happy for the first time in what felt like forever.

The two of them made a brief detour and Guy showed Luke around his manor. It was really nice, not as big as Luke's home in Baticul, but in some ways was much nicer. Luke smiled at some of the
familiarities he noted: furniture arrangements, the choice of decor in some rooms that seemed to mirror his own home and the redhead couldn't help but wonder if it had been intentional or not. As sad as Luke was that Guy wasn't around Baticul anymore, seeing his life here made Luke happy for his best friend. He was glad Guy had managed to find himself a place, even if his only job was, by Guy's own confession, walking Peony's rappigs.

Now, the two of them were making their way to the palace.

"You know," Guy spoke up. "You were pretty impressive back there."

Luke eyed his best friend suspiciously. "What did I do now?"

"I was talking about that fight you got yourself into."

"Hey, I did not start that. Those soldiers attacked me."

"Well at fault or not, you totally schooled them. I expected you to have gotten a bit rusty without a sword instructor." Guy elbowed Luke jokingly.

"Actually, Father has taken over our sword training."

"Oh, Asch must be loving that," Guy replied sarcastically.

"He wouldn't know, he never shows."

"Really?"

"Yeah, he always makes up some kind of excuse about being busy, even though Father goes through the trouble of making sure he doesn't have anything else going on during practice."

"I imagine your father would be a bit different than Van," Guy commented.

"Yeah," Luke agreed. "But Asch is just being stupid."

"Well he always was stubborn, he'll have to come around eventually."


Training with his father really was different than Master Van and it wasn't until the past couple months that Luke realized just how much he'd been fostered by his former teacher. His father always pushed him well past the point of exhaustion and nights of their training sessions always had him asleep before his head could hit the pillow. Master Van had always been satisfied with halfway, and had spent a good deal of the time boosting Luke's ego. With Father, there was always criticism, nothing was ever done perfectly and there was always room to grow. Praise from him meant infinitely more, because he wasn't so quick to simply dish it out. He was harsh, but it was through that he encouraged Luke to be better. Master Van had wanted him to be good, not as good as Asch, but good enough. Father wanted Luke to be the best he could be.

Asch just couldn't see that. All Asch saw was harsh criticism and a man who felt his sons could never live up to his expectations. What was going on with Asch lately? For all Luke had spent all his time with his older brother, it had taken him leaving to finally see the drastic changes that had taken place. The two of them would have a few things to talk about when he got back.

The throne room was just as Luke remembered it being, right down to the spirited emperor on the throne and the advisors that stood nearby. The only difference was that Luke didn't have near the
support standing behind him that he'd had before, but he refused to let that stop him.

"Your Majesty," Guy bowed before the emperor. "This is Luke fon Fabre, son of Duke Fabre; he was spotted approaching the city and attacked by a group of guards acting on the orders to detain any ranking Kimlascans." Peony nodded, dismissing the formalities but allowing for a tense silence to fall over them all.

"Luke," Peony was the first to speak. "What brings someone like you here of all places?"

"Please, your Majesty," Luke replied. "I came to Grand Chokmah because I wished to speak with Jade concerning a few matters and to visit my companions that live in the city here. If I may, why are there orders to detain any ranking Kimlascans? I was under the impression our countries had achieved a state of peace."

"You dare speak of that, you treacherous filth!"

"Nordheim!" Peony snapped at his advisor who immediately backed off. "Forgive us, but you'll have to understand that our actions are in response to your recent breach of the treaty."

"What breach is that?" Luke asked, his eyes alight with concern. Just what was going on?

"Recently the Kimlascan army has made several attacks on Malkuth troops," Peony explained. "The death count has been quite high and we've no choice but to act."

"Your Majesty, Kimlasca hasn't ordered anything like that!" Luke cried out before realizing where he was. "I've been at the castle almost daily, if there were any operation of that nature, I would have at least heard about it!"

"Luke," Guy interrupted. "You're nobility, but even you aren't privy to everything that goes on. Asch doesn't tell you everything."

Luke stared at the floor, his mind overcast by the harsh reality of what had been said. Guy was right... there was so much going on and Asch hadn't told him any of it. The Planet Storm, the problems with Malkuth, and then there were all those meetings Asch had that he spent sitting in the library. Just what else had his wayward other not told him?

"Even so," Luke finally said. Asch may have a lot to answer to, but Luke still trusted him and everyone else at the castle. "Kimlasca desires the continued peace between our countries; they wouldn't have organized those attacks."

Peony eyed the boy standing before him suspiciously, but Luke's determined gaze never wavered. The emperor grinned. "So you're here to talk with the old cod?"


"Sesseman, please send someone to get Jade out of that stuffy office of his."

"Your Majesty," the second advisor bowed and immediately left the room.

"The question remains, if it isn't Kimlasca's doing, then who is attacking our nation?"

"Isn't it obvious? He's lying." Nordheim interrupted. "There are no other forces who could oppose us, especially given that Daath is neutral."

"Other possibilities should at least be explored," Peony argued.
"What of Mohs?" Guy pointed out. "The timing would fit with his escape."


"Yeah," Guy replied. "When Ion returned to Daath the first thing he did was sack Mohs." Luke had to suppress his laughter; oh how he would have loved to be there for that. "He charged Mohs with using his position to mislead the world leaders and cause a war. He was imprisoned and sent here to face the charges issued by the nations, but he escaped custody. We think it was Dist that helped him get out, since he had escaped himself just a few days earlier."

"Given Mohs' past crimes, his involvement is a strong possibility," Peony agreed.

"Impossible, the enemy was seen flying the Kimlascan banner!" Nordheim argued.

"Ignoring its source for now," Peony diverted the accusation, "be it Mohs or Kimlasca, what should be done about it?"

"I believe that the best thing for both Malkuth and Kimlasca would be to sort things out through talks," Luke suggested. "I'm sure that this is nothing more than a misunderstanding. Look at what happened last time there was a misunderstanding: our countries ended up in a full blown war and countless people needlessly died. The innocents paid the price for our rash actions. We can't let that happen again!"

"You don't simply expect us to submit ourselves to attack, do you?" Nordheim asked. "Defensive actions must be taken!"

"Of course, I would expect no less," Luke answered. "It may not be Kimlasca, but someone is still attacking you. You have a duty first and foremost to defend your people."

"He has a point," Peony said, the look on his face almost one of pride.

"Well, after all that, there certainly can't be much left for him to talk to me about."

"Jade!" Luke spun around to see his companion leaning against the door frame. The Colonel entered the throne room and took his place near Peony.

"What took you so long?" the Emperor demanded tauntingly. "Did you leave your cane in your office again?"

Jade coughed indignantly. "Perhaps it would be best if his Majesty returned to the task at hand," he suggested.

"Right well, I'm willing to consider talks with Kimlasca if they'll concede to them as well," Peony said, a grin slowly working its way across his face. "I put way too much work into this peace treaty to have it fall apart now! Jade, Guy, I'd like the two of you to deliver my request to King Ingobert."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Guy bowed.

"Well, Luke." Jade adjusted his glasses. "It looks like we've need of your social status again."


"Good," Peony nodded. "This way you can talk with Jade about your personal matters over the trip, is that okay?"

"That's fine. Thank you, Your Majesty."
"I wish you a safe and less eventful journey than last time," Peony called after the three.

"Let's hope so," Guy managed once they'd left the throne room and were standing in the entryway.

"Yeah no kidding," Luke agreed. "Getting that last letter home was no cake walk."

"You keep surprising me," Guy commented with a pointed look at his best friend.

"What now?"

"You handled yourself really well back there. Asch must be rubbing off on you."

Luke laughed. "Yeah well, when all you do is follow Asch around all day, you don't really have much choice."

"Don't get cocky just yet," Jade intervened. "We're only just beginning. Let us sincerely hope that these endeavours won't end up in quite the mess that the last ones were."

"No kidding," Guy agreed.

"Now, Luke." Jade adjusted his glasses. "I'm told you had some problems to discuss?"

A chuckle escaped the redhead masking the exasperated sigh that accompanied it. "Where do I even start?"
Luke stared up at Baticul's heights, the shadows of the upper city casting over the citizens who hurried throughout the lower levels. While he had every plan to eventually return home, Luke had never thought it would be quite this soon. All things considered he hadn't expected to be playing peacekeeper either and he was more than anxious to confront a certain someone about why such a serious problem had come out of the blue.

The young noble had tried contacting his wayward sibling more than a couple times during their trip from one capital to the other, but either his timing was absolutely horrible or Asch was unbelievably busy because he hadn't succeeded in getting a single reply. Then again, knowing his luck, it was probably both; but whatever the reason, it still didn't give Luke any answers.

"I must say, the lack of activity is somewhat encouraging," Jade commented as the trio rode the lift to Baticul's upper levels.

"Yeah," Guy agreed. "It definitely doesn't look like anyone's preparing for war, that's for sure. Now if only we can keep it that way."

"Why is it that everything seems to happen all at once?" Luke grumbled. "First the Planet Storm, now the mysterious attacks on Malkuth..."

"Well you know what they say, misfortune always comes in threes."

"Well that's encouraging. What else could go wrong?" Luke wondered, though his mind had already given him the obvious answer.

_The one who would seize glory is trying... to capture... me._

"You know what... scratch that," the noble reconsidered. "I don't even want to know."

"Actually..." Guy began hesitantly. "I think I see it coming right now."

"Luke!" The furious princess was in the redhead's face before he even knew what had happened. "Where in all of Auldrant have the two of you been? How could you both just up and leave, dropping all your responsibilities like that! Do you have any idea what's been going on in your absence?"

"I see that you haven't changed, Princess," Guy commented.

"Guy!" Natalia suddenly noticed the two people accompanying her cousin. "My goodness, I almost didn't recognize you. You're looking very well these days," she eyed Guy head to toe. She had grown so used to the scant few outfits in his possession that the new, finer clothing really made him look quite different. Still, he looked completely in place standing behind Luke as he did, so much so that she couldn't resist a smile despite her anger at his former charges. "I apologize for my rude introduction, but I simply cannot excuse these two of such rash actions."

"What's going on?" Luke finally managed. "Mother and Father both knew I was leaving."

"I think she's presuming Asch is in our company as well," Jade pointed out.

"Wait..." Natalia's eyes flew through their group, suddenly filled with confusion. "You mean, Asch isn't with you?"
"What are you talking about?" the younger sibling asked. "Asch should be here in Baticul. He told me I should go visit everyone and that he was going to stay here and tend to his duties."

"I'm sorry. It's just the two of you vanished at the same time, so I assumed that you were together."

"Vanished? What do you mean, vanished?" Luke's voice had an edge of panic to it now. "Where's Asch?"

"I'm afraid I don't know; he's been missing ever since you left. I thought that perhaps the two of you had taken off together to get away from all the fuss that's been going on."

"Damn it!"

"But if you aren't with him, then it's best if you come to the castle and speak with Father. A lot has happened in the past couple weeks since you've departed."

"Yes, that's where we were heading ourselves," Jade agreed.

"Come to think of it, what brings the two of you to Baticul?" Natalia finally inquired.

"We've some business up at the castle," the Colonel explained. "We need to speak with his Majesty, but if Luke needs to see him, then we may simply intrude on his audience."

"I'm sure that would be of little concern," Natalia agreed. They all turned to Luke who had become completely distracted, which told them more about what was on his mind than anything else.

"Luke, we can figure out what's going on with Asch later," Guy reminded his best friend. "Right now we have work to do."

"Yeah... I know."

"Can you contact Asch through your connection?" Natalia asked as they all walked the endless stairs up to the throne room.

"No," Luke replied, defeated. "Wherever he is, he's blocking me out."

"You can do that?"

"Well, yeah, of course. I mean, we're connected but we still each have our own lives. I don't listen in on Asch's private stuff and I can block him out for mine if I ever wanted to. That's why I never realized that anything was wrong; Asch normally blocks me out when he's in those private meetings or when he's busy with work, so nothing seemed off. I just assumed he was busy..." Luke trailed off.

"Don't worry, we'll figure out what he's up to," Natalia reassured her cousin. She felt bad for him, and wondered what was going on beneath the surface that had him so upset. The look on his face alone told her that there more going on between the two of them than Asch's disappearance.

Yet, at the same time Natalia couldn't help but be impressed by the way the two of them had managed their unique link and at the boundaries and the respect for each other's privacy that they had so clearly established. The trust something like that must take... Natalia shook her head. Just what could her fiancé possibly be thinking?

"Father," Natalia spoke up; her authoritative voice echoed throughout the vast room announcing the presence of the newest guests.
"Luke!" Ingobert's surprise was obvious in his face, almost as obvious as the person his wandering eyes were looking for. "Where's Asch?"

"It seems as if they weren't together, Father."

"I see." The king mulled it over, but whatever conclusion he came to he kept it to himself and just as quickly dismissed it. "So Luke, I see you have Colonel Curtiss and Guy- I'm sorry, Count Gardios, with you."

"Just Guy is fine, Your Highness," the Malkuth noble said with a bow.

"What brings two of Malkuth's more prominent figures to Baticul? I presume that this has to do with the reported attacks on Malkuth troops?"

"Ah, so you're aware that such attacks have taken place?" Jade's curiosity was spiked.

"Aware yes," Ingobert provided. "But I assure you that such acts were not organized by our court. We received a message from some of our own people who were in the area and did some investigations of our own."

"His Imperial Majesty Peony the Ninth requests a meeting with your Highness to discuss the nature of these attacks and what course of action to be taken with regards to them," the Colonel said, kneeling and presenting a letter Peony had written that was quickly passed to Ingobert.

"Yes," Ingobert replied, accepting the letter. "Such a meeting is necessary, and I assure you I will do all in my power to assure that it takes place. For now we've too little information to go on."

"If I may ask," Guy interrupted. "What has your Highness discovered through the investigations you've conducted?"

"Unfortunately," one of the courtiers spoke up. "At the moment our prime suspect is missing: Asch fon Fabre, son of Duke Fabre and heir to the throne. His disappearance occurred just prior to the first reported attacks and he is the only one with the authority to have organized something of this nature."

"What?" Luke cried in outrage. "There is no way Asch would ever do something like that! Natalia!" The Princess looked away. "I refuse to believe that! It's-"

"Luke fon Fabre! That is enough!" The young noble was silenced by the court, but the anger in his eyes didn't abate. Maybe Asch was a jerk, but he wasn't a traitor and there was no way Luke was going to let these people stand here and slander his name while he was gone.

"Luke, please bring your friends to speak with me later. We will discuss this matter in greater detail," Ingobert finally broke the silence before dismissing them.

"Don't worry..." Luke almost seethed. "I will."

The hours that they waited for King Ingobert may as well have been days, and for all that Guy cared about his best friend, he was just about ready to strangle him. Luke spent the entire time pacing, each lap with more anxious energy than the last, occasionally angrily muttering something about how impossible this was. Guy for one was curious as to how Asch got himself into this mess, and just where he had taken off to.

The older redhead had proven to be somewhat of an enigma ever since they had separated after the
Absorption Gate. He hadn't heard word or whisper from him, and while Guy had figured that Asch really wasn't the letter type, he thought he'd at least get some kind of response for his efforts. Then there was the fact he'd kept Luke out of the know, undoubtedly on purpose, since there was no way Asch didn't know about some of these things, not when he was two years or so away from the throne. The reason, Score knows... or scratch that, not even the Score could tell them anymore.

Luke made another sweep, distracting the blond from his thoughts. Before Guy could continue to entertain the thought of throwing a book at his best friend, the library’s door opened and they could hear his Highness forbidding entrance to any others. Luke took a seat with everyone else around the table, doing very little to hide his opinion of how things had played out earlier.

"I must ask for your forgiveness regarding the issues that arose in court earlier today," Ingobert began, installing himself at the head of the table.

"So why is Asch truly being blamed for these attacks?" Jade inquired, adjusting his glasses.

"Wait," Luke looked confusedly at his uncle. "You don't think Asch really did it?"

"Of course not," the monarch smiled apologetically. "I refuse to believe that Asch would ever do such a thing. The decision to pin the blame on him was unanimously decided upon by the members of the court."

"Even Father?"

"No," Guy put a hand on Luke's shoulder. "I imagine Duke Fabre was excluded from the process since the issue involves his son."

"That's correct, his opinion would be considered biased and so was not given any weight. Unfortunately it's a decision I am powerless to overturn."

"The decision was unanimous," Natalia explained. "We don't have any support in labouring against these accusations. That's why we have been hoping Asch could return and clear up these misunderstandings. Your involvement was also considered," the Princess admitted with a look at the distraught young noble before her, "but unlike Asch you have an alibi, and with your return it is unlikely they'll pursue it."

"But what is there to gain by pinning this on Asch?" Guy wondered aloud.

"I suspect the court is jumping on the chance to convict Asch of treason and remove him from succession," Jade suggested. "If that were to occur, Natalia could no longer marry Asch and would have to choose someone else, with all of their sons as potential suitors, I'm sure."

"That is very likely the case," Ingobert agreed. "But the reason I called you here is that I'd like to discuss who the true culprits may be. All of Kimlasca's forces are accounted for and deny any aggressive acts against any Malkuth forces."

"If that's the case, then who is attacking?" Guy pondered.

"The reports from the survivors stated that the attacking forces consisted of approximately one company. They flew the Kimlascan banner but were poorly equipped and used tactics not consistent with those of a national military," the Colonel explained.

"They had empty eyes... as if they were already dead..." Guy mused. "A lot of the dying soldiers went on about that before they passed on. They might have been delirious but, that may be our key."
"That sounds just dreadful," Natalia commented. "What group could fit such a description?"

"Replicas..." Luke said quietly.

"What, Luke?"

"They had empty eyes, blank eyes... replicas are born blank slates, right? Could they be replicas of fallen soldiers?" Luke asked.

"There's a very strong possibility that may be the case," Jade agreed. "There have been such cases reported in connection with fomicry."

"So someone is using replicas to impersonate Kimlascan forces? This is an outrage!" Ingobert declared. "What do they hope to gain?"

"Likely to start a war no doubt." Jade adjusted his glasses. "Perhaps our theories concerning Mohs may not be so far off after all. I'll send a message to Emperor Peony detailing what we've discussed, since I don't imagine you can officially postulate outside the court's ruling concerning Asch."

"Thank you," Ingobert nodded. "I'll send a more official message as well requesting a meeting about these events. Rest assured, we will not allow war to break out. In the meantime, I beg of you, please get to the bottom of this and clear up these misunderstandings."

"We will, Your Highness," Guy said with a bow.

"Father! Please allow me to go with them, I have a duty to discover the culprits responsible and..."

"And to defend Asch?" Ingobert guessed. "Of course, I'll permit your departure. I wish you all the best of luck."


"Don't you worry; we'll find him, beat some sense into him and drag him home." Guy grinned placing one arm around his best friend.

"Indeed," Natalia agreed, also trying to comfort Luke by placing her hand on his other shoulder.

"Gyah!" Guy leapt off his best friend as if the redhead were on fire and dove shaking behind Jade.

Natalia laughed. "I see you haven't changed either."

Life was slowly returning to the Albiore; it now held six of its former ten passengers. Though it had been awhile since they'd been on the Albiore II, its design was identical to Ginji's machine so no one really felt out of place. Rather, it felt far too natural; the Albiores had practically become a second home of sorts. Flying through the sky had become as normal for the Kimlascan Princess as walking through the castle. While it was wonderful to get the chance to chat with Noelle, and to catch up with her friends, Natalia only wished it hadn't been under such dire circumstances.

"So where to?" Guy asked once they'd all settled in.

"Well, if the perpetrators are indeed replicas, then someone has to be making them," Natalia pointed out. "I somehow doubt Mohs knows enough about fomicry to produce that many replicas."

"No he wouldn't, there's a good chance Dist is involved as well," Jade agreed. "Perhaps we should
check in on what our God-General friends have been up to."

"Daath then?" Natalia concluded.

"Yes, that would probably be best."

"But what could they be after? Van's dead; you don't think they'd still be trying to see his plans through, do you?" Guy wondered.

"Luke, do you have any thoughts on the matter?" Natalia tried asking, but she didn't get an answer. The young noble in question was sitting alone in one of the seats, completely oblivious to the world. Outside his window he watched as raindrops slowly started to fall from the now cloud-covered sky, crashing into the window, their steady rhythm giving his mind a much needed distraction. Why... why had Asch abandoned him?

"Still can't contact Asch?" Guy easily guessed.

"Two months apart... I guess I'm still an easy read, huh?" Luke turned to face his friend. All the attempts at light-hearted jokes in the world couldn't have hidden the inner torment he was putting himself through.

"Don't be so hard on yourself Luke," Natalia tried. "Asch's actions have nothing to do with you."

"Of course they do!" Luke snapped. He took a breath, his eyes showing the regret at being sharp with his friends. "I'm sorry... it's just... I just..." Luke's voice was almost pleading, desperate even. He was grasping at straws but each was snapping in his hands. Natalia watched him, feeling as if someone had tied a rope around her throat.

"He left after sending me away... why would he do that? If he was going to leave, why didn't he want me to know? He didn't want me to come with him. It's my fault! I failed before and now he doesn't want me holding him back. It's my fault! I failed before and now he doesn't want me to come with him. It's my fault! I failed before and now he doesn't want me holding him back." Luke's voice continued to break, until it came out no louder than whisper. "Otherwise, why would he leave me behind like that? Why... why did he throw me away?"


"Don't fret Luke, when we find him, he's going to have a great deal of explaining to do," Natalia said, her own voice brimming with rage. She no longer cared what his motives might have been; it wasn't just Luke, Asch's utter dismissal of everyone who cared for him was unforgivable! There was no way he could say he didn't know what kind of effect his actions would have on all of them, and he had chosen this path anyway.

"We have to find him first," Guy pointed out.

"Noelle," Jade inquired curiously. "What is Ginji doing right now?"

"I don't know. He took off somewhere the night before we left, so I'm not entirely sure what he's up to."

"There." An evil glimmer sparkled in Jade's eyes. "Given Asch would have departed at the same time Luke did, I'd wager our missing future monarch has abducted himself an airship."

"Abducted may not be the right word," Noelle pointed out. "For Asch, I'm sure Ginji would take him anywhere he needed to go without even giving it a second thought."
"Noelle, those transmitters still function, correct?" Natalia demanded.

"Definitely," Noelle nodded and without needing to be asked, turned the dial to the proper frequency.

"Hey Noelle," the familiar voice came across the transmitter.

"Ginji!" Natalia spoke into the microphone.

"P-Princess Natalia! Umm... it's nice to hear from you again..." The sudden hesitation that came after Ginji's initial surprise pretty much confirmed everyone's suspicions.

"Ginji, is Asch there with you?" Natalia demanded.

"...no," he finally said.

"Ginji, where are you right now?"

"Well... you see, I thought I'd just go for a bit of ride- and-"

"You're not even fooling me," Noelle answered sceptically. "Asch told you not to say anything didn't he? And don't you dare lie to me!"

"Yes," Ginji confessed.

"Where are you right now?" Natalia repeated the question, but the tone in her voice clearly communicated that it was no longer a question.

"Just outside Daath."

"And is Asch with you?"

"No," the other pilot denied.

"Fine then Ginji," Natalia said curtly. "You tell Asch, because I know he's there, that he is going to have more than just Luke to answer to if he doesn't contact us very soon. And he knows what I mean by contacting us."

"S-Sure thing."

Noelle shut off the transmitter.

"To Daath please, Noelle," Natalia requested.

"No problem," the blonde pilot replied with an equal amount of fervour.

The Princess sat down, watching Guy in his attempts to comfort Luke, hoping for nothing more than a change of expression, a twitch of his lips, anything that might indicate Asch had heeded her request. But he remained still, Mieu curled up in his lap, growing more and more solemn as each second passed.

Natalia couldn't even imagine what he must be feeling. Even after everything that had occurred between her and Asch during their last journey, she couldn't fathom the impact this was having on her cousin. In her case, for all that it hurt, she knew why Asch had ignored her and acted the way he had: she had known she'd done something to deserve it. Luke had done nothing, he was completely innocent; and not just innocent, but Luke had spent his every waking moment for the
past two months trying to find ways to help his older brother! Yet Asch had cast him aside without any regard, without even giving him a reason!

There was absolutely nothing any of them could offer Luke, whose expression was quickly darkening and they didn't know what to do to help him. Natalia didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the irony of the next thought that crossed her mind.

At times like these, the only one who knew exactly what to say to Luke... was Asch.

Natalia hesitated a moment after knocking on the door to Luke's cabin. He had retired here several hours ago, but she knew that her cousin was nowhere near a state that would allow him to sleep. Guy had tried to intervene and tell her to leave Luke alone to think things through, but that was absolutely ridiculous. They both knew full well what kind of ideas time alone in his condition would breed and Yulia knew what kind of foolish notions he was concocting while in a mood such as that.

When there was no reply and Natalia tried knocking one last time. It had been almost two days now since they'd left Baticul and Luke's temperament hadn't improved at all in that time. If anything it had worsened to the point of almost being unbearable. As much as she hated to admit it right now, when it came to the difference between Guy and Asch's philosophies in regards to handling Luke, Asch was entirely right; it wasn't wise to just let Luke have his way. It was understandable for him to be upset, but this was just ridiculous.

With a sigh of defeat, Natalia opened the door to her cousin's room and slipped inside, quickly closing the door behind her. Luke turned his head when she entered but didn't say a word, returning instead to staring at the opposite wall.

"You're not still sitting in here and sulking are you?" Natalia demanded her hands on her hips and giving her cousin a disproving stare. The young noble didn't answer, but he bit his lip and before the Princess' very eyes, his eyes began to water. Natalia's expression softened and her displeasure melted away.

"Really now Luke," Natalia crawled up onto the bed next to him, leaning back against the wall, and gently stroking his back comfortably. "I realize you're only seven, but unfortunately you really don't have the luxury of being able to indulge in such childish behaviour. It may not be fair, but it's the truth."

"It's all my fault," Luke muttered.

"Luke... I don't know what you think you did, and you certainly don't have to tell me, but Asch's actions have nothing to do with you. They are not any indication of your worth, and his irrational behaviour is most definitely not your fault."

"But I was the one who let him down. There was something really important I was supposed to do, that I was supposed to make sure I didn't screw up, but I did! I messed it up and that's why he doesn't trust me anymore."

"I'm sure Asch didn't give up on you just because you made one little mistake."

"Then what?" Luke snapped. "If that's not why then... then that means he always felt that way! That he was just waiting for the chance to get rid of me! I can't... I can't handle that..."

"Luke, enough is enough!" Natalia stood up, her tone very put on. "What, are you nothing without Asch?" That got her cousin's attention.
"Of course not!"

"Then stop acting like it's the end of the world that he's not here! Yes what he did was awful, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't angry with him for running off without us like that, but your attitude is only making things worse. You can't keep doing this, going over the questions and 'what if' again and again. Have you even seen what you've done to yourself?"

"I..."

"You are not Asch's shadow, nor are you incapable of doing things without him. All the things you've done this past year, all the effort you've been making at the castle, those are all your accomplishments, and yours alone. Stop acting like Asch is the sole purpose of your existence and be the bigger person here!" Natalia sighed, her expression softening into a gentle smile. "We need your help here and now, to help stop a war and to investigate the Planet Storm. It's your turn to stand on your own."

"I know," Luke offered a weak smile. "Thanks. Do you mind leaving me some time to think?"

"That depends, will it be the same kind of 'thinking' you've been doing for the past two days?" Natalia cocked an eyebrow. Luke chuckled.

"No, I'm just tired, that's all."

"If you say so." The Princess rolled her eyes once her back was turned. She knew when her presence was unwanted. She left, pulling the door behind her until only a small crack was still open, hesitating to completely close it. She didn't want to leave him if he was just going to sulk again.

"Ugh," Natalia heard Luke wearily flop down on the bed. "Big sisters are such a pain." A warm smile rose up from within the Princess and she closed the door all the way.

"Still..." Luke mumbled as he drifted off to sleep. "It's kind of nice too..."

Many different thoughts ran through Luke's mind as the soft drizzle came down on the travelling quartet. The road to Daath was quiet, as were the four travellers walking upon it. No one was in a rush, rather the rain was somewhat refreshing, but it left the young noble with entirely too much time to think; and with Ginji's Albiore nowhere in sight, the chances he was going to be getting answers anytime soon didn't look very good.

On the other hand, those thoughts didn't weigh down on him nearly as heavily as they once had. He had a certain overeager princess to thank for that. Still, Natalia had been right and his sulking was just childish and stupid. He had decided that he was going to stand on his own, to prove that he had a place in this world other than just being Asch's replica. Living in the shadows of others had only ever led him to Akzeriuth, and he had sworn to those who'd died that he would never go down that road again. He had just forgotten... and it had taken Natalia's scolding for him to see it. The first real test and he'd fallen right back into his old ways... he was so utterly hopeless.

"I don't imagine Asch is here," Natalia commented eyeing the crowded streets.

"No, we didn't see any sign of the Albiore either near Daath or docked in Daath bay," Jade pointed out. "If they ever were here, it's likely they've moved on by this point."

"Which means Asch got your message and is ignoring us," Luke said with more conviction than he realized he had.
"Yes well, we'll deal with that in due time," Natalia stated. "First we need to figure out how to get an audience with Ion without Anise's assistance."

"You called?"

"Anise!" Guy jumped about two feet backwards. "Wh-what are you doing here?"

"Geez, I don't see you in two months and that's the welcome I get? Talk about lame! You're supposed to say, 'Oh my dear sweet Anise! I've come for you at last, to sweep you away into the life of luxury and riches the likes of which you've only ever dreamed!'"

"I'll keep that in mind for the next time we reunite after defeating an evil Commandant and lowering the world into the Qliphoth," Jade replied, adjusting his glasses.

"Boooo," Anise stuck her tongue out.

"How did you know we were coming?" Luke asked.

"Because I'm absolutely amazing!" Luke gave the girl a pointed look. "Oh please, your hair sticks out like a sore thumb pretty much anywhere other than Baticul. I saw you and thought I'd come see what's up. Speaking of catching up, where's Asch? You know, it wouldn't kill him to pick up a piece of paper and write back!"

"Sorry," Luke said. "He's never been much of one for that sort of thing."

"I can tell," Anise replied sarcastically before drastically changing her tone. "So what has you in Daath?" she piped up with cheer enough to compensate for Luke's lack and her fervour made the young noble smile.

"We could ask the same of you," Natalia replied. "Did you regain your position in the Oracle Knights?"

"Me? No, Maestro Tritheim helped me out a lot and found me a place to stay. I still chat with Ion now and then, but I don't have any formal position."

"So you've been in the Cathedral quite a bit then?" Jade asked.

"I guess you could say that, why?"

"Have you seen the God-Generals about?"

"Well Largo and Legretta have both been by a couple times, but Gloomietta is the only one who seems to be around on a regular basis. After the lands lowered and Score readings stopped, a whole bunch of Oracle Knights up and left, including quite a few of the upper ranks. The Order is a real mess right now; it's got Ion super busy! Religious overhauls are a pain in the butt."

"Hmmm," Jade pondered. "I suspect Arietta's presence is to keep an eye on the Fon Master's actions."

"Maybe she's just trying to get her old position back?" Luke suggested. "She did always seem more interested in having Ion near her than in Master Van's plans."

"She better not be!" Anise got defensive faster than you could say 'jealous'. "Besides, her feelings are all for the original Ion! She just doesn't know that they're different people!"

"I feel kind of bad that no one's told her anything," Luke commented.
"Indeed, but something of that nature is not for us to say," Natalia reminded him. Luke smiled in understanding and nodded in agreement.

"Anise, have you seen Asch around lately?" Luke asked, surprising his companions by being the one to bring up that topic. Still it was encouraging to see him coming back from his dispirited demeanour.

"No," the young girl replied. "Why has he stopped by recently?"

"We think so," Guy provided.

"Well I haven't seen him, but if he came here he probably would have stopped to see Ion."

"Even if he didn't, he is the heir to the Kimlascan throne," the Colonel pointed out. "Word of his presence may have reached Ion regardless."

"He's the heir for now," Luke mumbled.

"Yes, assuming we get this mess cleaned up," Natalia agreed.

"True, but I for one have every intention of using that fact against him until otherwise noted," Guy stated rather boldly and managed to get a chuckle out of Luke.

"Oh oh! Spill it!" Anise demanded eagerly. "It's been forever since I've heard any good gossip! What's the deal with Asch? Why wouldn't he be the heir anymore?"

"It's a bit of a long story," Guy answered. "We'll explain later."

"Oh, I hope it means he's single again!"

"Why are you always after Asch? You know, Luke is single," Natalia pointed out, her voice bearing a sharp edge to it.

"Hello! Me, Tear, no comparison! She's in a cup size all her own; you on the other hand I can compete with!"

"Excuse me!" Natalia's face turning red and Anise giggled with all the mischief they had come to know her for.

"So Anise," Guy picked up on their original intent. "You said you've been visiting Ion, I don't suppose you could help us to see him?"

"Who do you think you're talking to? It may not be all official and such, but I know who to talk to. Actually... it's Remday, isn't it? It'll be even easier than that."

"Then you lead the way," Guy said with a sweeping motion towards the cathedral.

"It's a good thing I'm here," Anise rolled her eyes, taking delight in the confused looks she got. "This way."

The former Fon Master Guardian brought her four companions through a maze of buildings that eventually led them north of Daath, to a district they'd never been to before. Luke looked up at the majesty of the cathedral that still towered high above their heads. They'd never seen it from behind before. The houses here were slightly more run down than their well-kept cousins near the main entrance and the ground was uneven as it began to slope up towards the mouth of Mt. Zaleho. The young noble eyed the volcano warily, deciding he'd rather not fathom the consequences should it
someday decide to erupt. Daath wouldn't have been built here if the Score said it would erupt but... the Score didn't mean much anymore now did it?

Anise hushed them as they slipped in one of the rear entrances, presumably one that the lower staff utilized and after several more winding corridors, they came out into a courtyard. The yard looked like the sort of place that would be just lovely in the sunshine, but even though its colours were dampened by the overcast and steady drizzle, it was well kept and quite impressive. It was also, not surprisingly, empty, save for a single figure that sat beneath a giant oak tree.

"Ion!" Anise ran up to the young Fon Master. "How many times have I told you to wait inside if it's raining? You're going to end up catching the flu!"

"Don't worry Anise, it's fine. The air is still warm and the tree shelters me from most of the rain. Luke! Everyone!" Ion's face lit up when he noticed the figures standing behind his friend. "It's such a pleasure to see you again!"

"It's great to see you too Ion," Luke greeted his companion heartily.

"What brings you all the way to Daath?"

"There are a few matters we'd like to discuss with you," Jade replied. "But perhaps it would be best if we went someplace more private?"

"Certainly," the Fon Master answered, pulling himself up from the ground. "Come, we can speak in my office."

Moving through the cathedral with Ion proved to be much easier than doing so with Anise, and rather than avoid others, most people they came across smiled and greeted the Fon Master and his companions. Everyone here seemed surprisingly cheerful given all that was going on, but from what Anise said, everyone who didn't support Ion had left, so their perception was pretty skewed.

Guy was still impressed by how well things seemed to be functioning.

Passing through the main entrance started to give them a better idea of the trials that the Order was putting up with on a daily basis. There were more than a few furious people there, demanding the Score, which they claimed to be their right. People just couldn't let go... Guy shook his head but couldn't completely condemn them, he had been there, been willing to do whatever it took to fulfill his own selfish perception of justice. People believed the fall of the Outer Lands was in the Closed Score, and still believed it was on track. He doubted any number of explanations would quell their fury or convince them to concede their demands. Guy really felt for Ion who dealt with this stuff on a daily basis.

Thankfully once they got to the upper levels, things became quieter and the blond was glad that Ion at least had this silent reprieve.

"So what is it you need to discuss?" Ion asked once he'd shut the door of his office behind them.

"Let's start simple," Guy suggested. "Has Asch been to see you recently?"

"He has. It was just a few days ago, he asked me to show him to the entrance to the Sephiroth here, but he left without saying a word."

"The passage ring? Why would Asch be looking for the passage ring?" Guy wondered.

He's looking for the Jewel...

If Asch was after the Jewel, then all the more reason he should have talked to Luke about it! That was all the more reason he should be helping too! Asch knew! He knew Luke felt awful about screwing up and wanted to help make things right! The endless days in the library researching... the way he had gone to Sheridan to find out more instead of just running off to visit friends... it all came to mind and Luke found himself frustrated beyond belief at his sibling's antics. He felt genuinely betrayed, by the one person he thought he could always trust.

"The passage rings themselves are no longer active," Jade said, his red eyes meeting Luke's every few seconds. Luke's ability to keep a secret had shown itself to be impressive, but judging by the range of emotions he was observing, it wouldn't be long before the redhead would crack and share whatever it was he was hiding. Luke knew what was going on, but Jade would play along for now. Prying would be far easier once his emotions properly ripened. "I doubt there's much of use he could obtain down there."

"Is something the matter with Asch?" Ion asked worriedly.

"I wouldn't worry." Jade adjusted his glasses, the light catching the lens giving them an eerie glare. "It's nothing a good beating and a time out won't fix."

"Alright then," Ion dropped the subject, sensing the tension the discussion had brought over the group. "But while you're here, Jade, I'd been hoping for the chance to speak with you. Do you have any thoughts on the recent increase in the Planet Storm's strength?"

"Ah yes, Luke raised some similar concerns as well," the Colonel commented. "At this current time, I don't believe it poses any sort of threat; that is, provided it doesn't continue to increase in strength. Spinoza had drawn up a few theories, but at the current velocity, there shouldn't be any problems."

"That's very good to hear," Ion said with a sigh of relief. "I've asked Teodoro to put together as much information as he can on the topic and to investigate the cause. Yulia City is much better equipped in their knowledge of Dawn Age technology than we are to look into these matters. I'm due to go see him at my earliest convenience. Would you like to accompany me?"

"Certainly," Natalia agreed. "If there's anything we can do to help settle the Planet Storm, then both Kimlasca and Malkuth should be made aware of it as soon as possible."

"Good thinking," Guy agreed.

"Yeah, it's not like we know where Asch is going, and I doubt Ginji's going to answer on the transmitter if we try again," Luke stated. "Let's get to the bottom of this and then work on figuring out what the God-Generals are up to."

"Are the God-Generals causing problems again?" Anise inquired.

"We don't know for sure, but we think Dist at the very least is up to something with Mohs," Guy provided. "We can explain everything on the way to Yulia City."

"Oh!" A sudden realization struck Ion. "Speaking of Yulia City, how is Tear doing? I'm afraid I haven't had the chance to write to her."

Luke smiled but there was a hint of sorrow and regret hiding just behind it. "Honestly, I don't know, but I don't think she's doing that well. She's written me a couple times but never talks about herself."
"That definitely sounds like Tear," Anise agreed.

"Cheer up Luke," Ion smiled softly. "I've been doing some research into her condition and I think I know of a way to cure it. It's an old Daathic Fonic arte, but it should eliminate the tainted fonons from her body."

"That's wonderful!" Natalia almost cheered.

"Yes," Ion agreed. "So let's be off to Yulia City, shall we?"

Luke shook off whatever train of thought had captured him, and with one last look out at the rain that still fell over the Holy City he followed his friends.

Asch was Score knows where, and hadn't offered any sort of rhyme or reason for abandoning Luke where he stood, but the young noble refused to let that stop him anymore. If that's how Asch wanted things to be, then so be it. He was going to put a stop to this with or without his sibling's help, and he would learn to stand on his own two feet.

Then maybe someday, Asch would see Luke wasn't a failure, and maybe, just maybe, he'd regret his choice.
Exchanged Fates

The tell tale glow of the glyphs that had once lit the passage rings so avidly was absent, and without their light, making his way through the once proud structures was proving to be more of a challenge than Asch had expected. The passage rings themselves were as dead as the Sephiroth trees they had once housed and the glow of his torch gave them an almost eerie look. The young monarch pulled his sword from the sheath. Nothing; he cursed under his breath. Damn it all, where the hell had that Jewel gotten off to?

If there was one upside to wandering these Score forsaken places in the dark, it was that if the Sword of Lorelei even so much as thought of glowing, he would notice it. The Sword was supposed to react when the Jewel was nearby, but Asch was starting to run out of places to look, and he'd yet to see any kind of reaction. Maybe Luke really did have it.

But what reason would Luke have to hide it? No, Luke's guilt was real. Even if for some reason it was all smoke and mirrors, with the way Luke had followed him around these past two months, if Luke had it, the Sword would have reacted. Asch let his mind wander as he carefully began back out towards where Ginji had parked the Albiore. He debated the idea of contacting Luke, but that was opening a can of worms he didn't care to deal with right now. Ginji had given him Natalia's message...one more reason he didn't want to go there. After all, he'd left for a reason.

Asch had known he'd have problems with Luke when his little brother caught wind of the things he'd failed to mention, but he didn't honestly expect it to be so soon. What had brought Luke back to Baticul in less than a few weeks? Not that it mattered. He wasn't there, nor did he have any intention of returning home any time soon. Yet somehow the towering city still loomed over his thoughts despite his best attempts to dismiss it. He didn't need that burden right now; he had too much to deal with as it was.

The young noble let out an exasperated sigh. He didn't have the time or the desire to deal with his brother or Natalia. Let them go about and do what they had to; he had far more important things to take care of. With a shake of his head, he banished them, and all the overbearing consequences that came with them from his mind. Where next? That was what mattered: here and now and the things he had to do. There were really only a few places left to look. Then the fun would begin.

A small field of selenias shone under the pale starlight that spread across the night sky, each opening their petals to the world as the final traces of the day vanished from the horizon. Luke smiled at the familiar sight, glad that the silver blossoms hadn't suffered from the sudden change that Yulia City had gone through. This is where everything had truly begun for him. After the hell that had been Akzeriuth, it was here where he'd taken those very first steps on his own. That thought alone brought a warm smile to the young noble's face. If only she were here with him...

Yulia City really was amazing; not that it hadn't been a nice place to begin with, but it had changed so much now that it was no longer surrounded by miasma. Over 2000 years had passed since the City of Watchers had last seen the sky, and as it sat so innocently beneath the stars, Luke could see the beauty that he was sure Yulia had always intended to have shine through.

Too bad it was late; Teodoro hadn't been available to meet with them when they got here so things would have to wait until morning. Noelle had tried her best to hurry, but the time difference was working against them. Still, there was no particular rush, at least not one for which one night would make or break. None-the-less the sooner things could be settled between the countries and the Planet Storm properly dealt with, the better.
And such led to a series of events that found everyone at Tear's house, and Luke standing alone in
her garden wishing for the melodist's presence. Here a single lonely monument sat shining in the
moonlight at his feet, simple as the blossoms that surrounded it. For Van... Luke wanted nothing
more than to ask about it, but to do that they would need to find Tear, a task that was quickly
turning out to be more difficult than it initially seemed. She had apparently left Yulia City, or so
the person in the street had said, but even he couldn't say where she'd run off to. Hopefully
Teodoro could help them on that front. Where could she have gone? Or more importantly, just how
was she really faring? Luke sighed sadly knowing the likely answer to that question, even if it
wasn't the answer he'd get from Tear herself. If only she'd remained as untouched as her garden.

Luke stood before Van's grave solemnly, surprised by the regret he found fostered within him.
Mixed in with his worries about Tear's wellbeing and concern for the current state of world affairs
that had been unwillingly dumped on his plate, Luke couldn't really identify what was spurring his
racing emotions. Even though in reality the monument before him was futile, it hurt, more than he
thought it could. Maybe just because he knew the stone's purpose was nothing more than a symbol
of his lies. He would bear that burden if it would spare Tear the pain she had gone through these
past months.

He'd do whatever it took to see her smile again.

"Paying your respects to Van?" Jade's voice broke the quiet of the night.

"Tear never told me she'd made him a grave," Luke answered solemnly.

"No matter what atrocities he'd committed, he was still her brother," Jade pointed out.

"Yeah, I know... I can understand those feelings, probably more than I want to," Luke added a bit
of bitterness coming through towards the end. Jade grinned.

"Yet, even though Van's gone, things still feel like they're running out of control; though the
missing God-Generals may have something to do with it." The Colonel paused for a moment. "You
know why Asch is investigating the passage rings, don't you?"

Luke let out a heavy sigh. "When we lowered the Outer Lands, after defeating Master Van, Lorelei
contacted us again. He said that he'd send us the key we needed to set him free."

"I figured there was more to your exhaustion than just your hyperresonance," Jade adjusted his
glasses and Luke nodded in confirmation. "So Asch is looking for this key then?"

"No, he's looking for the other half of the Key. He's looking for the Jewel of Lorelei. After the
Outer Lands had been lowered, Asch got the Sword of Lorelei but..."

"But neither of you received the Jewel," Jade concluded. Interesting... so the legend was more than
just fantasy after all.

"I didn't get the Jewel," Luke corrected him. "All this time I've been trying to figure out why; but
more important than that, where it might have gone. This was my mistake, and I want to make
things right. I want to fix it but Asch won't let me! He knows that I want -no- that I have
to do this! I have to clean up my own mess! Why can't he accept that? Why does Asch treat me like some kind
of baby that needs everything done for him?"

"Perhaps he's simply trying to help you," Jade suggested. "Though his methods may not be the
most practical, they're irrational enough to be expected of him."

"If he wanted to help, I could accept that. If he wanted to come with me, that would have been fine!
But instead he chose to lie and to sneak around behind my back and walk all over me like I was nothing! Now he's going to the other Sephiroth to see if the Jewel ended up there, while I'm here trying to help fix everything else he decided not to tell me about."

"He won't find it at the other passage rings," the Colonel muttered to no one in particular.

"Do you know where it is?" Luke's emerald eyes shined hopefully.

"No," he replied after a moment. "Unfortunately, I don't." And even if he did...

"I just wish..." the young noble trailed off.

"What do you wish?" Jade asked, his red eyes penetrating and Luke almost took a step back under the Colonel's intensity. "Leaving that day in Baticul, had things played out exactly as you wished for, how would they have gone? What would you have done differently? What could you have done differently that would bring you whatever it is you now desire?"

"I wish Asch would have trusted me, that's all. He sat there and smiled as I left, wishing me the best when behind that smile he was about to betray me. How could he smile knowing that?"

"Asch was never one to share his feelings, or his reasoning. Probably the reason he doesn't get along with your father, both of them are far too alike in that regard. Asch may have his reasons for not involving you this time around that he simply couldn't share."

"But Asch should know better than anyone," Luke said, his voice gaining a conviction it had been lacking. "That all I want is to be able to be there for him when he needs me. Not just to help him, but because by watching him and learning from him, I can start to find where it is I belong too. That's why I have to fix my own mistakes and learn to make amends for the things I've done."

"Well if nothing else you've gained some insight over the past couple months," Jade commented. "Unfortunately it seems your stubbornness still predominates."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing I assure you," Jade smiled slyly.

"I know Asch usually hides his feelings," Luke finally admitted. The weight on his shoulders had lifted and he breathed in deeply. "I guess I'm just not used to being the one he's hiding them from." Luke smiled sadly in defeat. "Then again, I guess if you think about it that way it makes sense why the two of you get along so well."

"And where might you have picked up such an exorbitant misconception as that?"

Luke simply smiled, before turning to head back inside. "Thanks Jade."

The Malkuth Colonel sighed, shaking his head as he stood alone in the darkening garden.

"Such troublesome children."

Ion sat patiently in Yulia City's conference room, the morning sun streaming in through the large windows behind them. Jade stood by the window, gazing out on the residents of the city as they began about their day. His behaviour was familiar, something concerned him and that in and of itself was cause for Ion's own concern. It left the topic of his worries somewhat of a mystery, especially given he'd already told them there was no reason for there to be any problems arising
from the Planet Storm. The Fon Master almost wished he'd be more forthcoming at times like these: Jade being lost in thought had shown itself to be a poor prognostic factor for any situation.

At the very least, his friends had done an admirable job maintaining the peace between Kimlasca and Malkuth. From the sounds of things neither ruler seemed to be falling for whomever was scheming to antagonize their relations and were planning on talking through matters until said person, most likely Mohs, could be apprehended. Unfortunately, in the meantime it left Asch upon which the blame had been laid.

Ion was in full agreement with all his companions that Asch would never desire such a thing, and even Jade couldn't come up with any logical motivations or benefits Asch could possibly derive from such radical actions. None-the-less, Ion couldn't totally disagree that his behaviour was suspicious to some extent, and could see why the Kimlascan court, given their questionable and personal motives with regards to the matter, had taken up on the opportunity. Why would Asch simply leave without at least leaving word? There was the obvious reason: that he determined that his departure wouldn't be permitted and so had chosen to sneak away instead. It made sense, but it didn't explain why he had continually failed to contact them, or why he was preventing Luke from doing the same. Surely Asch didn't think Luke intended to drag him back home against his will? From Ion's understanding Luke would never do such a thing, and Asch was more than aware that he could trust in his sibling. But perhaps he had been wrong.

Seeing what recent developments had done to his friends, Luke in particular, was difficult, and it pained him to see them so upset. Ion was sure Asch must have his reasons, but he sincerely hoped that this wouldn't drag out much longer. Though he was hiding it rather well, everyone could see just how upset Luke was about Asch's recent endeavours. The fact that he'd gone from being saddened to angry was only a sign of just how betrayed he felt. If this went on much longer, there was a very good chance their relationship wouldn't come out intact, if it survived at all; and for two siblings as close as they were, that was something that couldn't be allowed. Ion doubted either would recover should such a thing come to pass.

The silence in the room was becoming unbearable. While Ion was no stranger to situations in which he required insurmountable amounts of patience, even he was being tried. He certainly hoped that Teodororo wouldn't be much longer.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Yulia City's mayor apologized as he walked in the door, a couple of books and several old scrolls in his hands. The way he hurried told them how busy he must be, and how little time they would have to discuss such important matters. He set his load down on the table before them, taking his seat at its head.

"No, thank you for seeing us on such short notice," Natalia said. "I'm sure things must be rather chaotic around here."

"Indeed, they are," Teodororo nodded. "I was worried about what would happen to this world now that it's strayed from the Score. I wasn't sure if the people of this city could adapt, but we seem to be managing."

"I'm glad to hear that," Ion smiled.

"It's quite the task you've burdened yourself with."

"But one I feel is necessary," the Fon Master replied with conviction. "Were you able to look into those matters I inquired about?"

"Yes. With regards to the Planet Storm, there doesn't seem to be any immediate risk."
"We'd deduced as much already," Jade replied. "Is there any visible risk in the future?"

"Not that we can tell, but do remember that our knowledge of Yulia's technologies is quite limited as well," the mayor pointed out.

"What about the cause?" Luke asked. "Can we figure out what's causing it to act up like this?"

"This is where things grow more complex," Teodoro commented. "There has been a recent decline in the overall number of Seventh Fonons. To add to this, there are places in which they are being consumed at astonishing rates."

"Do you know where?" Anise piped up.

"One location is undersea near the Sixth Sephiroth but when we sent an investigation team, we weren't able to find anything. They are in pursuit of the second location now."

"In pursuit? How can you chase a location?" The former Fon Master Guardian asked sceptically.

"For whatever reason, its location continues to change. We've yet to pin it down or discover any pattern to its movements. All we've been able to establish is that it is moving about the oceans."

"Hmmm," Jade pondered the matter. "The only peacetime application of that many fonons would be fomicry. Perhaps our problems are in fact one and the same."

"Yeah, but fomicry machines don't just up and run around!" Anise protested.

"Could it be on some kind of mobile facility or ship?" Guy asked.

"I doubt there are any existing ships of such magnitude," Jade stated.

"Well, if it's that big, we might be able to spot it from the Albiore," Luke suggested. "Not that combing the ocean seems especially productive; I don't know what other options we have right now."

"Given more time, do you think you'd be able to isolate a pattern from its movements?" Ion asked.

"Assuming there is a pattern to be found, then yes, it is possible."

"Could I ask you to do that for me and send word to Daath as soon as you can?"

"Certainly Fon Master," Teodoro nodded.

"In the meantime," Ion interrupted the man before he could stand up. "Do you happen to know where we might find Tear? We heard she left Yulia City but not where she was going or if she's due back soon. There's something quite important I'd like to discuss with her."

"I believe she received a message from an old friend and went to Tataroo Valley to meet with them. She didn't express her intentions following that, so I don't know when she'll return. Now if you'll excuse me, I've another meeting I must attend." Then without another word, Teodoro stood up and promptly left the room.

"I'm sure he must be quite busy," Ion commented. "I've caused quite a bit of trouble for everyone in this city."

"No way Ion! You did what you had to do! There was no way we could let people keep following the Score when it's all wrong anyways!"
"Thank you, Anise."

"Well, what do we do now?" Guy asked. "I'm leaning with Luke on this one, combing the ocean doesn't seem like an especially good idea."

"No," Ion agreed. "I trust that Teodoro should be able to provide us with more information in that regard soon enough. I think for now we should see if we can catch up with Tear, I'm concerned about how her illness might have progressed."

"Will she even still be in Tataroo Valley by the time we get there?" Anise asked.

"Well, even if she went by ferry and then by coach it would still be quite the trip," Guy pondered. "There's a good chance we'll catch up with her somewhere along the way."

"What worries me is, why Tataroo Valley?"

"What's the matter Luke?"

"Well... Tataroo Valley is in the middle of nowhere, why would anyone pick that as a place to meet? Something just seems off about this whole thing."

"Either Tear lied to her grandfather about her destination, or perhaps her acquaintance isn't all they seem," Jade commented.

"Let's go to Tataroo Valley," Luke stated. "If Teodoro hasn't gotten back to us about the moving fomicry facility by then, we can look for it ourselves."

"That sounds fair," Natalia agreed. "I certainly hope Father and Emperor Peony will manage in the meantime."

"I wouldn't worry Princess," Jade pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. "Neither ruler wants war, and other than trying to disinherit Asch, neither court seems up to anything questionable either. It's more a matter of political formalities than anything."

"Then let us hope it remains that way."

It was just past midday when Guy and his friends found themselves walking past the trees that marked the entrance to Tataroo Valley. It was just as green as he remembered it being the last time they'd been here, though Guy for one was hoping they wouldn't have the same trouble they'd been given last time. Luke was right, why would anyone want to meet Tear here of all places? Something was suspicious and as much as Ion and Luke wanted to talk to her, the blond honestly hoped it was that she'd lied to Teodoro.

No. That wasn't like Tear, now was it? Asch on the other hand seemed to be abound with lies in the past couple months, and it looked like Luke wasn't the only one affected by it. Natalia's front was more impressive than Luke's was but he knew them both better than that. Then again, he thought he knew Asch better than that too. What could he possibly be thinking? It was anyone's guess, if anyone cared enough to bother guessing. Asch's bridges were burning faster than straw soaked in oil.

At least Luke seemed back to normal, or as normal as one could expect given the mess they were still sorting out. He'd be doing much better if they'd already found Tear, but all things considered, he'd been dealing with everything remarkably well since getting over Asch's little disappearing act. Though they still had way more to deal with than Guy would have liked, it was manageable. It
wasn't the mad chaos that lowering the lands and taking Van on had been, he could be thankful for that much.

Everyone walked along in silence, tense perhaps at what might be waiting for them around the next turn. Jade had no reason to complain, and was actually rather amused at just how skilled his companions had become in terms of stealth. It was so much different than the way they had once stomped around the countryside, drawing in every enemy force for miles around. Now, not even the monsters were being disturbed, and with no conscious effort involved either. It had just become habit after sneaking around the God-Generals and the Oracle Knights for so long.

At the head of the group Luke froze, and beside him Natalia did the same. The sound of the river could be heard as it ran just beyond the cover of trees that they were working through, then the sound of footsteps, almost as soft and inconspicuous as their own had been. But what held his interest? Jade followed Luke's gaze and the flash of red hair as it hopped onto a fallen tree to cross the river sent an evil grin spreading across his face. Of course... Tataroo Valley was a passage ring.

Luke quickly hurried forward, not making a sound to alert his unsuspecting sibling who still hadn't noticed their presence. Guy motioned to follow but Natalia quickly raised her hand, almost hitting him in the face in her effort to stop his advance. The Malkuth noble stumbled backwards and the Princess felt bad for using his gynophobia to intercept him, but at least he remained silent. Let Luke do as he pleases. After everything that had happened lately... whatever he was going to do to Asch, Asch had coming.

"I don't get it," Anise whispered. "Can't they sense each other through their CCN?"

"Normally yes," Jade replied, a mischievous gleam in his eye. "But remember, Asch is blocking Luke out. It works both ways."

Luke jumped onto the log, no longer making any effort to disguise his presence. In a flash he drew his sword, bringing it down on his reflection who hastened to block his strike. The younger sibling wasn't put back and unleashed a fury of attacks that forced the other redhead backwards as he struggled to keep his balance under the unexpected assault. Luke swung one last time, staring through narrowed eyes at his sibling and the Sword of Lorelei that had stopped his blade. Asch's determined look quickly widened to one of shock.

"Luke?" Asch's tensed muscles relaxed at the familiar face. Taking full advantage of his dropped guard, Luke threw his weight behind his sword and sent his sibling crashing into the river.

Asch sat up in the shallow river glaring in annoyance at his brother who was still looking down on him from the log. Well if he was going to be wet... Asch took a swing at Luke's legs, but to his dismay, Luke easily leapt over the strike and landed back on the log with flawless balance, his hateful glare never abating.

"Luke!" Asch looked over to see Natalia who was calling to his sibling. Oh great, they had everyone with them. Just what he needed.

"Asch where are you going?" Anise demanded when Asch started wading his way towards the other side of the river. "Do you have any idea the trouble we went through because of you?" Jerk. He was ignoring her!

"Oh don't think we're going to let you go that easily," Jade commented. His arte went off a foot in front of the redhead in question, the recoil of his energy blast sending Asch tumbling back into the river. The process repeated itself four more times, the arte getting progressively closer until the
blast went off just in front of his face.

"Damn it old man, what the hell do you think you're doing?" Asch finally demanded when he went flying into the river for the fifth time.

"I've enough energy and there are enough fonons abound to continue at this for at least five days," Jade stated simply. "Either you stay and speak with us or we can continue our little game."

"I don't have the time to be messing around," Asch argued. "I'm busy, I have things I have to take care of, now let me go!"

"Asch fon Fabre you get back here this instant!" Natalia demanded at the top of her lungs. Asch turned around and shot her a dangerous glare, but hers was far scarier. "Don't you dare look at me like that! You are this close to being disinherited for treason and for ordering attacks on Malkuth troops. Luke, Father and I all stuck our necks out for you in court and you have yet to give us a reason why we should have even bothered!"

Asch looked genuinely surprised by Natalia's statement and stopped his attempts to retreat. He pondered for a moment before sighing. "I'm not going to win this, am I?"

"No," Jade stated firmly.

"Fine," Asch accepted Guy's hand out of the river and rang his hair and jacket out. "What do you want from me?"

"What have you been doing all this time?" Natalia asked.

"It's nothing that concerns you," Asch answered curtly.

"Yes it is," Luke intervened.

"No it isn't."

"Then what have you been doing?" Guy asked.


"Jewel? What jewel?" Anise asked.

"My Jewel."

"What jewel?"


"Agh!" Anise yanked on her pigtails. "I'm confused, what jewel are you talking about?"

"If you were going to look for the Jewel, why didn't you let me come along?" Luke demanded, ignoring Anise's protests.

"I didn't need you getting in my way," Asch shot back.

"Then why didn't you say anything? Why did you lie to me? After everything we went through! You spent the last two months hiding everything from me!"

"You wouldn't have taken it quietly."
"Of course I wouldn't have! That's the point! This is my responsibility! Instead you were just stringing me along and took off behind my back!"

"Of course I lied!" Asch yelled back. "All you ever did was follow me around! I had to do something to get rid of you! I don't want you here; I never did, and I never will. The last thing I need is some incompetent idiot following me all over the place and holding me back! I don't care about whatever your crusade is this time. There are more important things going on here then petty politics in Baticul, you should be able to see that. Not that you've ever the first clue about crap going on. You jump in whenever it's convenient, and whenever you don't like it, you just leave it for the rest of us to handle. Must be nice to live on a pedestal like that," the redhead sneered. "I don't need you around, so why don't you just go back to whatever little game it is you were playing and leave this to the grownups."


"The same thing goes for you," Asch shot bitterly. "I don't need your help; you'll just get in my way. Go play your games and leave me alone."

Silence fell over everyone. Asch turned to leave.

"Bullshit!" Luke's voice trembled and his anger even turned Asch's head. Luke walked right up to his brother and stared into his mirrored emerald eyes. Asch was almost taken aback by the sheer unadulterated fury he saw in them.

"Fine," Luke declared, the rage brimming in his voice. "You don't want me around anymore, fine; then go. You can go rot in hell for all I care. But stop running away from me and say it to my face! I don't want any more of your crap excuses. Tell me! Tell me why Master Van's logic was right after all. Tell me why you think I'm no more than some disposable commodity and that you can throw me aside when you're done with me! Look me in the eye and say it! Then you can go."

Asch held his gaze for only a second before he broke in front of Luke's intensity and turned his head, staring at the ground in search of answers he wasn't going to find.

"Well then Asch," Jade spoke up, breaking the tense silence. "Since you aren't able to provide a valid reason for your solo ventures, I'm afraid we're going to have you come with us. It will be easier to sort out the problems between Malkuth and Kimlasca if you're present."

Asch didn't offer any further protests. Luke forcefully brushed past him and continued up the valley without so much as looking him in the eye. Natalia wasn't far behind him. Asch watched them smothering the inkling of regret he found within himself. They were hurt, he knew they would be, but he hadn't thought... Still, they were better off hurt than dead.

Jade had no idea what he was doing.

Anise stretched, suppressing a yawn as she continued to walk alongside Ion, leading everyone else up the valley. Well, not really leading, Luke was the one who really knew where they were going, but for now there was only one trail and she was walking faster than them, so she was in the lead.

In the end they had decided to make their way up the northern side of the river, a path Luke apparently knew from the very first time he and Tear had been here. There wasn't any real reason to think Tear would be meeting her so-called "friend" on this side over the southern side where the passage ring was. But then there was the fact that it was the southern side that Asch wanted to get
to so bad, and well, no one was in the mood to please him. Besides, it would be harder for him to slip off if he had to backtrack... not that he was getting by the Colonel anyways.

And serves him right! Man! Sure she remembered Asch being a bit spiky at times, but nothing like this! She couldn't believe the things he'd said to Luke and Natalia, and after they'd been so worried about him! What an ass! Poor Natalia was still reeling from their earlier encounter from the looks of things. Then there was Luke, he had really caught Anise off guard. She'd expected him to do what he always did, to get all quiet and sulky and such, but he went and stood up and put Asch in his place! It was so satisfying to see! Someone had to cut down that oversized ego of Asch's!

"Hey," Luke spoke up, gently touching Natalia's arm and drawing her from whatever thoughts had consumed her. "Weren't you the one that said it was unbecoming for a noble to sulk like that?"

"That wasn't quite what I said," Natalia chuckled, wiping the beginnings of tears from her eyes. "I'm sorry. I just don't understand how Asch could be so unconscionable. Yes he has been irrational and reckless, but I never thought he could be so cruel."

"Don't take it so hard," Luke said comfortingly. "He doesn't really mean those things. Not that it makes it any less his fault for saying them and knowing the effect they'll have."

"What do you mean?"

"He has some kind of reason for acting the way he did just now."

"But you were so angry with him..."

"I am mad," Luke answered simply. "Reason or not doesn't excuse him of the way he's treated either of us. I refuse to believe that there's any cause that left him with no other option than to take our feelings and walk all over them like that. I'm just saying he has a reason, I'm not saying that makes him right, or that I'm going to forgive him for it."

Natalia giggled. "You logic is rather familiar."

"Well two can play that game," Luke teased and Natalia smiled gratefully. She was appreciative of his attempts to cheer her up, and was impressed at his ability to make jokes about something that had so clearly cut him very deeply. They were both that way... the smile of another came before any amount of personal pain.

Natalia's smile widened and she said something to Luke that made him laugh in return. Guy added a comment of his own and before long all five of them were happily chatting as Asch watched on. Stupid old man, if Jade hadn't been taking up the rear he could have slipped away ages ago! They weren't even paying attention to him, not that they ever did, but he was still trapped for the time being. So he watched them, hating every second of it. It wasn't like any of them actually needed him anyways. What an unbelievable waste of time.

"If you're feeling remorseful, you ought to apologize," Jade said, completely out of the blue.

"And what would give you a ridiculous idea like that?"

"The way you're enviously watching them; you're hating yourself for the things you said earlier."

"Shut up."

"There's nothing to be ashamed of about feeling regret."
"Why would I be regretful? Nothing's changed." Asch looked up at everyone walking, their conversation, their wide smiles... it was the same as it has always been, even when he was out of the picture. "Things are exactly the same as always."

"Jade!" Luke called as he jogged back, passing Asch without any manner of acknowledgement that the other noble even existed. "Ion's tired; is it okay if we stop in this next clearing?"

"Certainly, I've no problems." Jade shrugged and Luke hurried back up to the front of the group relaying the Colonel's agreement to the brief reprieve.

"Luke's not as weak as he once was," Jade commented once said young noble was out of an earshot, noticing the way Asch's eyes followed his brother all the way back up to their other companions. "He won't make the first move. This mess is yours to clean up."

"I told you to shut up!" Asch shot back.

"Don't get snarky with me young man," Jade scolded tauntingly.

"Stop acting like my father!"

"From what I've heard you wouldn't know even if I did."

"Why you good for nothing-!"

"The two of you mind keeping it down?" Guy commented. "We're stopping for a break, not to have your yelling attract every monster in the valley."

Jade simply shrugged leaving a fuming Asch to angrily plop himself down on a nearby rock. But sending death glares at Jade got old really fast and the older redhead quickly found his mind wandering onto other things, the words Luke had said to him emblazoned at the forefront of those thoughts. Had that one ever backfired. Since when was Luke that confident... or bold for that matter? Then again, how much attention had he even really paid to his brother in the past couple months? Had Luke really changed that much?

Anise watched the older twin from a distance, a bit of an evil smirk on her face. She knew she shouldn't be enjoying the fact that Asch obviously wanted to talk to Luke, and that Luke was more than happily ignoring him while in conversation with Ion, but it served him right! Judging by the growing look of supreme frustration on Asch's face, she'd even venture to say Luke had figured out how to keep their CCN closed. Irony was such a beautiful thing.

"So are we going to be like this for the rest of this trip?" Asch finally asked aloud, apparently conceding to the fact that they weren't going to be able to talk privately.

"What do you think?"

"Oh grow up," Asch shot.

"Why do you care? You didn't want me around, why should that change now? After all, you're just fine without me." Luke shot back.

"Hey, I'm here now, aren't I?"

Luke's head turned, looking Asch in the eye for the first time since their previous argument. His intensity hadn't subsided in the least. "So what do you want? You think you can just say 'oh hey sorry' and everything will just go back to normal? I'm not a punching bag you can throw around
when you're mad or for whatever twisted purpose you come up with. I get hurt too; maybe you just
don't realize that. But guess what? I'm past the point where I need your support or approval for the
things I do. So yeah, you're here," Luke stated angrily. "But you're only here because you're forced
to be... and that doesn't mean a damn thing."

The younger sibling stood up and walked away, announcing the end of their break and was
followed unquestioningly by his companions. Asch remained frozen to the spot for a moment,
before being ushered ahead by Jade. Whatever other thoughts had been sifting through the young
monarch's mind were completely swept away by the sheer vehemence of what he'd just seen. Asch
had learnt to take a lot from Luke over the almost eight years they'd been siblings, but not once had
he ever seen genuine hatred. Asch had known when he'd chosen this path that they would fight, he
had known Luke would be angry... but he had never dreamed it would go this far.

Well then fine. If Luke wanted to be like that, he was more than happy to let his replica have his
way. Let him have his stupid little temper tantrum, see if he cared. Luke didn't want him around
anymore... well two could play it that way. He didn't need his little brother's constant badgering
and whining anyways. After everything that he had done for Luke... and he had still tried to make
amends but had been shot down where he stood.

If that was how things were going to be between them, so be it.

The sun was high in the sky, the gentle breeze tossing the selenias side to side, their soft white
petals closed to the world around them as they waited for the cover of night. The green grass that
grew among them danced in the wind overlooking the ocean as it sparkled in the afternoon light.
Two figures stood alone among the sleeping flowers, each as silent as the other but only one of
them had the air of uncertainty that begged the reason why the two found themselves here in this
time and place.

"Tear," the blonde woman greeted her guest who stood defensively before her.

"Major Legretta," the God-General's student replied, the hesitation skilfully hidden in her voice but
obvious to the woman that had trained her.

"I'm impressed you came, I didn't think you would."

"I came because whatever it is you want to discuss must be important if you made up such an
extravagant lie, to say my brother is still alive, just to get me here," Tear answered. Legretta
smirked; the hesitation was gone. Good.

Tear stared down the God-General unsure of what to make of her. Legretta's message had come so
completely out of the blue, and Tear would be lying to say it hadn't messed with her head. How
could her mentor make such a claim? There was no way Van was still alive... she'd watched him
die. Watched him as he fell hopelessly, surrendering his life for the shadow of a dream. What did
Legretta hope to gain from her now? The passage rings were dead, so they didn't need her on that
front... surely they didn't intend to continue her brother's madness. Even if they did, how did she
play into all of this? Perhaps it was those questions that led her here; even when every instinct in
her body told her this was a trap.

"And what if I told you it wasn't a lie?" Legretta continued, baiting her former student. Tear fought
against the shock and doubt she knew must have swept over her face. It was impossible... Clearly
satisfied with Tear's reaction, the God-General continued. "Your brother is still very much alive, as
are his dreams. Do you honestly think that such a world as this can last?"
"Of course! Everyone is working their hardest towards building a new world that's free of the Score. It's what my brother wanted!"

"People are unable to live without the Score; it will only be a little while before things break down. Things are fine in times of peace, but how long will it be before war or other disasters descend upon the world? Humans are weak; they'll turn back to the Score."

"No, I believe that people can change," Tear said with conviction.

"Why? Because that worthless replica you love pretended to change? No one changes, not him, not the people of this world, not this planet's future. Pretending the Score isn't there doesn't make it go away; the end will come just the same."

"You're wrong!" Tear shook her head in denial. Things could change, people could change! Why... why did Major Legretta cling to her brother's twisted dreams? And to use his death to further those means? She had already lost her brother, the last of her family, and still she was going to have to face her mentor the same way! She didn't want to go through this again... she didn't know if she had it in her to repeat the trials she'd faced just two short months ago. Nor did she think she had the time.

"I am not wrong, neither is Van. He once believed the things you did, but he saw it himself. The future cannot be changed; it will not deviate from the path it is on. We will give the world a future, even if it is one the planet itself rejects. Come Tear, come join us. Van wants to see you; he wants your happiness more than anything."

"You're wrong, he's not alive! You're lying!"

"Why are you so upset? You should be happy your only brother is alive."

"It's a lie!"

"Tear!"

"Luke, everyone!" Tear looked in shock at her friends who were now standing all around her. What were they doing here? What- How did they know she'd be here?

"Quite cruel of you to hide the truth from one you call your friend, wouldn't you say so, replica?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Luke yelled back. "What are you trying to accomplish? What are you doing to the Planet Storm?"

"You both know as well as I do," Legretta replied, this time her gaze falling on Asch. "Nothing has changed, our goals are no different than they once were. We desire the future for this world." Legretta drew her guns and everyone immediately took a defensive stance.

"You can't defeat us all on your own," Jade said simply.

"I don't need to defeat you to get what I want," Legretta replied snidely before almost vanishing. Next anyone knew Asch had raised his sword in defence and fending off the speedy God-General.

Guy and Anise joined in the fray but no matter how many times they distracted her she returned to Asch. What was going on? Jade's mind raced amidst the battle as he tried to make sense of it all. Legretta was a ranged fighter; her weapons best suited her to attacks from a distance and disadvantaged her in the middle of the fray. Why then was she so eager to go hand to hand with Asch? Even if he was her target then why not attack him from a distance that he couldn't retaliate.
Unless... unless Asch wasn't her target.

Legretta jumped back dodging Natalia's arrows as well as both Luke and Jade's artes. A smug grin spread across her face as she looked down on the eldest sibling who was trying to hide his laboured breath. "How long do you think you'll be able to keep defending it before someone you love gets hurt?"

Legretta's bullets bounced off Luke's sword. The younger sibling managed to deflect them harmlessly into the ground but his heart was racing at just how lucky he'd been that he'd reacted in time. Legretta jumped back away from Jade's arte preventing a second assault.

"You win for today," Legretta conceded. "But we will be taking that sword. Even if everything you've ever cared for has to die before we get it." Asch shot the God-General a deadly glare. "Tear! Don't believe that Van is alive? Ask your boyfriend over there about what he's not telling you. You just may be surprised. No one changes." Without another word, she vanished.

"Tear, are you alright?" Luke hurried to her side.

"What were you thinking coming to the middle of nowhere to meet Legretta all by yourself?" Anise demanded.

"I doubt she had any reason to believe that Legretta would be hostile," Ion provided. "She's an important person to you, am I right?"

"I'm sorry, I realized it was probably a trap, but she told me that my brother was still alive. I had to know for sure."

"And what did you discover?" Ion asked.

"Luke." Tear turned to the young noble. "She said you could tell me. What did she mean?"

"Luke, do you know anything of this?" Jade demanded sternly.

"Yeah, we knew."

"Wait, Asch you know too?" Anise turned to the older sibling.

"What do you know?" Guy asked.

"We knew Master Van was still alive, Lorelei told us," Luke confessed, looking intently at the ground. "He's most likely in the core; at least, that's our best guess."

"And you felt this wasn't important enough to mention?" Jade stared at them both disapprovingly.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! If the Commandant is still alive, why didn't you do anything about it?" Anise demanded.

"He's in the core," Asch shot back. "What did you want us to do? Jump in after him?"

"I'll tell you where to jump right now," Anise muttered.

"Well it's slightly more rational than what you did decide to do," Jade stated, earning him a harsh glare from the older sibling. "Never-the less, Luke, what exactly did Lorelei say to the two of you? I want it word for word."

"Luke, Asch, I will send you the key, use it to set me free'," Luke quoted. "'The one who would
seize glory is trying to capture me.' And that's all I heard. I've been trying to figure out exactly what Lorelei meant since then and... well..."

"And find the other half of the key," Jade provided. Luke nodded in conformation. "Asch, how long have they been threatening you like that?" The redhead simply scoffed and turned his head.

"How long?" Jade demanded in one of the harshest tones they'd ever heard him use.

"Nine weeks."

Nine weeks? Natalia listened in disbelief. Asch had... he had been fighting off the God-Generals all this time? But that was impossible! Surely someone would have noticed! The Kimlascan Princess felt a tendril of guilt curl up in her stomach. She had been the first one to see it, the first one to realize he hadn't been himself, that he'd been bothered and distracted; but she had been so quick to pin it on his duties and dismissed it without even asking him.

Luke had known earlier; he had said Asch had a reason for his harsh words and seemingly cruel actions. Yet neither she nor her younger cousin had noticed the problem for what it was. Perhaps they did somewhat deserve the contempt with which Asch had approached them. Legretta had said it herself, that she would come after those Asch cared for. He had gone through so much to protect them and they hadn't once bothered themselves enough to ask him why he was so weary.

"So almost right after you returned to Baticul," Jade pondered. "Have you considered the possibility that the God-Generals may have the Jewel?" Jade asked. "They clearly have some sort of interest in or purpose for the Key to make that sort of effort and they've two months head start looking for it."

"I didn't," Luke admitted. "I didn't have any reason to."

"Asch, why didn't you ever say anything?" Natalia asked. "Surely there was something we could have done to help."

"I didn't want you involved." Asch dismissed her.

"You still could have told us," Luke protested, clearly still upset. "We could have kept our guard up, helped keep them away, anything. You didn't want Legretta attacking us, but you thought it would be better for us to be abandoned and then to have you trample all over us?"

"Better hurt than dead."


The Colonel sighed. "Any and all bitter feelings aside for the moment, I wish you would have said something about this earlier; this changes everything."

"How so Jade?" Ion asked. "Yes Van is alive, and there's a chance he may try to resurrect his plan, but I don't see how it affects what we're currently doing. There really isn't any reason for the topic to have come up."

"Unfortunately, whether Luke realized it or not, the fact that Van is alive is still of vital importance. If Van were to actually succeed in capturing or sealing Lorelei, then there would be a tremendous drop in the number of Seventh Fonons available. In attempts to maintain the balance, the Planet Storm will try to compensate by increasing in velocity. It will eventually reach the point that the Tartarus can't neutralize the vibrations anymore and the mantle will liquefy. With the Sephiroth no longer active, the Outer Lands will sink."
"So what do we do about it?" Anise asked. "We obviously can't let that happen, it would be the same as if the Outer Lands had fallen in the first place!"

"Ideally freeing Lorelei would solve the problem of the fonon balance and the Planet Storm would return to normal. Likewise dealing with the increased Seventh Fonon consumption would at least slow the process and give us more time."

"So we're still looking into the mystery of the replicas and the moving facility," Guy provided. "Until we've a better idea of what the Commandant is up to, yes."

"I can't believe this," Tear managed. "I can't believe my brother is still alive."

"Tear..." Luke motioned comfortingly towards the melodist but was cut off by her sharp look.

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" She demanded. "You knew this whole time, why hadn't you ever said anything?"

"I'm sorry, but I knew we were eventually going to have to deal with him, and I didn't want you to go through what you had last time. I didn't want you do get hurt if you didn't have to be."

"You had no right to make that decision for me. He is my brother and his actions are just as much my responsibility as they are yours!"

"But..."

"She's right Luke," Guy pointed out. "You did the exact same thing you've accused Asch of doing to you."

Luke's eyes widened, realizing the truth of what Guy had said. "I'm sorry Tear," the redhead finally managed. The melodist opened her mouth to say something, but instead erupted into a fit of coughing.

"Tear, are you alright?" Natalia hurried to her side, but Tear smiled weakly and dismissed her support.

"It's fine, I just ran out of my medication. I was planning to go pick up some more once I was done here, but the trip took longer than I had expected."

"Well I guess that's why we're here," Anise piped up.

"Why is everyone here?" Tear asked.

"Ion says he found a Daathic Fonic arte that can cure your illness, so we came to find you. We were all really worried, especially lover boy over here," Anise added with a sly look at the now reddening younger noble.

"But Daathic Fonic artes aren't good for your health," the melodist protested. "With my medication, I'm doing just fine; you don't have to strain yourself. Especially now that I'm not exposed to the miasma anymore..."

"No, really Tear, it's alright." Ion smiled. "Besides, your medications can't suppress your illness forever, and it will eventually progress. You've sacrificed a great deal for the benefit of this world and all the people in it; let someone do something for you. I'm not certain if it will work, but I would at least like to try."
"But-" Tear tried again to protest but Ion had already taken her hand in his own. Before anyone could say anything more on the subject, both Fon Master and melodist we enveloped in light that swam around them like the fonons drawn in by the arte.

Tear closed her eyes, losing herself in the feeling of warmth that washed over her. It felt like the first breath of fresh air taken after being cooped up in a small space for a long time. She hadn't realized just how affected she had actually become, the extent to which the taint had suppressed her senses and her feelings. It was the most wonderful feeling, the feeling of life that had returned to her.

"Ion, are you alright?" Tear opened her eyes to see the light had faded and the fonons dispersed. Ion looked up at her and smiled, but was clearly much paler.

"I'm fine," Ion stumbled backwards and was caught by Luke. "I'm just... a little... tired."

"Ion!" Anise cried out but lowered her outstretched hand when Luke sent her a reassuring look. "Honestly, you think he could have at least waited until we were somewhere he could rest properly. Do you need me to carry him on Tokunaga?"

"No, it's alright," Luke answered his voice surprisingly solemn as he moved the Fon Master onto his back. "He's not that heavy."

"How are you feeling Tear?" Anise asked.

"Much better," she admitted. "Better than I have in quite awhile."

"That's good to hear," Natalia smiled. "Hopefully that'll be the last we'll see of that dreadful illness."

"Agreed; but in the meantime, let's get going. The sooner we get moving, the sooner we can get Ion someplace he can rest," Guy suggested. "Tear if there's somewhere you want us to drop you off, we can."

"If you don't mind, I'd like to come with you. If you're dealing with things concerning my brother, I'd like to be involved."

"Of course you're welcome to come along," the young Malkuth noble replied.

"Thank you."

"You know," Anise commented with a chuckle once they had started working their way back down. "This is pretty familiar. It seems every time we come here Luke is carrying someone back down."

"Yeah," Guy agreed with a playful elbow at his best friend. "But at least this time no one is damaged beyond repair, right?"

Luke managed a weak smile.

'Are you alright?'

'I'm still mad at you.' Luke answered, but his tone lacked the edge it had before.

'I know,' Asch replied. 'But that doesn't mean I have to stop giving a damn when you're upset.'

'I'm fine.'
'Look, I know I handled things-'

'I know, but that doesn't mean that there's something the matter with me,' Luke shot back, clearly not ready to make any sort of amends. He'd made the same mistake, but apparently that still didn't make either of them right in their actions.

'If you say so.'

Luke sighed, the short lived distraction doing nothing to lift the weight that was crushing his chest. Why did Asch have to be so damned perceptive all the time? Leave it to him to sit there and wait for a chance to sneak across their connection like that... Luke shook his head. He could take his frustration out on his sibling all he wanted but he knew that wasn't the problem.

The problem was that Anise was right, this was entirely too familiar. The weak breathing, the way Ion was so light and fragile that Luke felt he might break him... and the feeling of the tainted Seventh Fonons as they travelled through the young Fon Master. An icy cold hand tightened its grip around Luke's throat as he realized the truth. Ion hadn't cured Tear; he had made the decision to shoulder her disease himself.

He had taken her death sentence.

'Are you sure you're alright?' Asch asked. Luke picked up his pace so no one would see the tears that threatened to overflow.

'I'm fine.'
The Past Never Dies

The sound of the river flowing was soft and constant; a soothing rhythmic pattern that played over as the water ran down across the rocks, and had Asch not been so busy trying to follow his racing mind, he would have probably found it comforting. Instead the sound mocked him, taunting him for his failure to complete the tasks he'd set out to do and reminded him of all he'd lost in the process.

He'd managed to get across their connection, to speak to Luke when his little brother's guard was down, but Luke's thoughts and feelings still remained a mystery. Asch had tried a few tactics, anything to keep Luke talking, to give him a chance to glimpse at what his brother was actually thinking, but it hadn't taken long for Luke to catch onto what he was doing and to shut him out entirely again. Luke kept his thoughts and feeling locked away from his older brother's reach and not knowing what was going through Luke's head, even in the most general sense, left Asch completely lost as to where to start.

Their fight this time around was foreign territory. In almost eight years as siblings, he and Luke had fought more times than Asch could shake a stick at. They fought over stupid things, and sometimes over serious things that actually mattered, but mostly just because they gave a damn about each other which for whatever reason seemed to make it so much easier to get pissed off. It was easier to get mad, and easier to get hurt. A punching bag, that's what Luke had said... that he wasn't just Asch's punching bag. That wasn't true at all! It wasn't like Luke was all innocent! He was- Asch cut himself off, unsure if he was ready to admit that weakness even to himself... but it was still the truth. Luke was probably one of the few people that could genuinely hurt him back.

It was probably why the God-General's tactics had been so damn effective. They knew he wouldn't let Luke get hurt, or Natalia, or his family, or anyone in Baticul for that matter and his flight was the only way he could avoid playing right into their hands. Let them try whatever underhanded blackmail they wanted to, he wasn't going to dance the way they wanted him to, not by any stretch of the imagination. It was for that reason, and that reason alone that he couldn't let Luke find the Jewel. Ungodly stubborn as his sibling may be, Luke was too soft and cared about his friends too much. He would give up the Jewel without a second thought if it meant that everyone could be safe and happy. It didn't make him wrong, it just couldn't be allowed... for Lorelei's sake and for the sake of the world Van would destroy if he got his hands on the Key. So Asch would shoulder the burden himself, and everyone else could go about their lives, and just keep on hating him.

Of course, it didn't help that Asch was growing more and more desperate. He needed to find that Jewel and there was the chance that Luke knew something he didn't. He had to find it before the God-Generals did. They didn't have it yet... of that much he was sure. The God-Generals wouldn't be so desperate to get the Sword from him if they'd already secured the Jewel. Still...he was running out of passage rings, and if it wasn't there, he needed to know where else to look. He'd have to wait until Luke calmed down a bit and try again, it's not like he was getting far any time soon. Out of the corner of his eye, Asch could see the log and the path that led across the river and to the nearby Sephiroth. He could still try to slip away... Damn it all, he hadn't been caught-

"If you truly intend to leave and search the Sephiroth, I'm not going to stop you," Jade's voice interrupted Asch's train of thought and the redhead immediately turned his attention away from his desired path.

"Yeah, right," Asch rolled his eyes. He wasn't falling into another of the Colonel's traps. He'd had enough of those to last him a lifetime.
"How many passage rings do you still have to search?"

"Two, not counting the Absorption and Radiation Gates. Why? What do you want from me?" The young monarch asked defensively.

"You needn't get so worked up. I meant what I said, if you seriously intend to leave and search those Sephiroth for the Jewel of Lorelei in spite of what's happened, then I won't get in your way. If you don't escape here, you will eventually; we can't force you to remain with us short of binding and gagging you, and while I'm sure Luke would be happy to do so, I left my good rope in Grand Chokmah."

"Real funny old man. What's the catch?"

"There is none; this is your decision to make. You can leave to search the Sephiroth and I won't stop you. You may find the Jewel, you probably won't. But then what? You've nowhere else to look. You can't return Baticul, you'd be arrested for treason and you'll have antagonized the only two people in this world who could defend you. Ironic isn't it? You set off this chain of events to avoid the God-General's threats, yet your actions have the same result. Both paths leave you stripped of the people you care for, they leave you with nothing in the end."

Asch was silent, his pace slowing as his mind absorbed the entirety of what Jade was saying.

"For the record," Jade whispered in Asch's ear. "Acting out the consequences of a threat yourself is not the best way to deal with blackmail."

"Shut up."

"Well, someone has to point these things out," Jade shrugged. "You're vacuous enough as it is."

"Hmph," Asch scoffed but turned to Jade with a look that the Colonel had never seen on the boy before. It was anger, but at the same time, filled with more hurt than Asch would normally betray. "Does it make you feel special; using your big words to tell me I'm empty inside?"

The older twin turned away and walked ahead, but even the air about him told the Malkuth Colonel he'd struck a nerve, a highly sensitive one by the looks of it. It left Jade somewhat curious. It wasn't like Asch to betray weakness like that. Maybe there was something more serious that would be worth looking into there.

Before Jade could finish contemplating just how much he should be reading into Asch's rare and just as unintentional disclosure, something near the base of the valley had stopped the others in their tracks. Brushing their current issues aside, both the Colonel and the young monarch hurried to catch up with their companions.

"What's going on up here?" Jade demanded.

"I'm not sure," Luke stood as defensively as he could with the unconscious Ion still on his back. "I thought I'd heard -"

"You heard us," a female voice declared, drawing the attention of the entire group. She was blonde, standing tall and proud despite her worn clothing. A long katana hung at her side, and her blue eyes were piercing despite her innately soft voice. No one would have thought anything of it, had Guy not buckled where he stood.

"That's... that's impossible!" Guy muttered, his eyes still wide in shock. "M-Mary?" There was just no way... it- it couldn't be! Mary was dead, she was murdered! He- Guy fell to his knees, bracing
his head that was rushing with so many conflicting emotions that the blond couldn't even begin to process them.

Faces... so many faces, all covered in blood. Their faces, their bodies, they all pressed against him, their blood soaking through his clothing until his entire body was stained red. Then there was her face, the blood ran down it, he could feel it as it trickled down through his hair, the horror of where he was trapped, of staring into her blank eyes as they clouded over. No! He had to; he had to escape, to get out of there! He couldn't move, he was bound by these corpses, bound by their weight as they pressed against him, suffocating him.

Mary...

"Wait, Mary?" Luke's gaze raced from his best friend back to the woman standing before them. "Your sister, Mary?"

"Looks like Dist is involved after all, no one else would have the replica data from the citizens of Hod," Jade stated sternly.

"What kind of low shot is that supposed to be?" Anise demanded in outrage as Guy was still on the ground, shaking violently at whatever memories her face had brought.

"You said 'us,'" Asch demanded. "What did you mean?"

"Mohs orders were to restrain the Princess and her fiancé," Mary called out. "Kill the others!"

Damn it, this was an ambush! The forest around them suddenly came alive as countless oracle knights burst forth from their cover. Luke instinctively drew his blade, but even just in doing that, he could tell that he wouldn't be fighting off too many of these enemies. With Ion still out on his back, his mobility was compromised to say the least, and he'd have his hands full just trying to protect the young Fon Master. His green eyes darted side to side, trying to keep an eye on as many of the forces that surrounded them as he could. They weren't all Oracle Knights, in fact only about half of them were. The others were shoddily equipped with aging weapons and armour. Their clothes were dirty and torn, some a horrible mismatch of fabrics that had been salvaged from Score knows where. Luke cursed under his breath, Mohs had been a busy little boy... and he was playing dirty.

Luke's heart froze when his eyes fell on more and more familiar faces in the ranks of his enemies. Iemon... and Tamara! His friends that had been lost... how could- how could he- Even if Ion hadn't been on his back, there was no way Luke could attack these people. They were his friends, Guy's family...

"That's..." Tear stepped back in surprise, her shoulder colliding with Luke's.

"Tear, are you okay?" Anise asked, noticing the melodist's sudden distress.

"I'm sure... that's- that's my father." Tear managed, her emotions having long since overcome the normally controlled melodist. "I've only ever seen pictures of him but... I'm sure."

"How could Mohs even think-!" Luke cursed. The enemy forces quickly organized themselves, closing off any possible route of escape. They weren't going to win, even if they had the will to fight. They just couldn't... they couldn't attack their friends.

"Well played," Jade commented. Mohs had planned this encounter well, the sudden appearance of lost loved ones and comrades had managed to shock them enough to delay their reaction and got them into a position where attempts to fight or escape were futile. Unfortunately, that didn't seem
enough to dissuade a certain someone from trying.

"Asch what are you doing?" Luke yelled as his sibling charged at Mary, forcing her to draw her sword. She met his blow cleanly with far more skill than one would expect of a newly born replica. She sidestepped and struck forcing Asch onto the defensive.

"What are the rest of you doing?" Asch yelled back, "Do you plan to lie down and die here or are you going to actually fight for your lives?"

"That's Guy's sister! And Tear's father, and our friends!" Luke yelled back. Asch rolled his eyes; he should have seen that one coming. Damn it, couldn't Luke see there were bigger things at hand here than a handful of half-hearted ideals?

"Oh get over yourself! They're just replicas!"

It didn't take half a second for a piercing rage to crash over Asch and he realized the implications of his words.

'Luke that's-'

Nothing. Luke had completely shut him out. Great; just great. If he could get his sibling out of this alive, he had an earful or two for him. How could he just be ready to die because he couldn't fight someone who looked like his old friends? And what if Asch himself got caught? He'd lose the Sword of Lorelei and the God-Generals would do Yulia knows what with it, if they didn't just destroy it! It was their only chance of freeing Lorelei and stopping Van!

"Why do you resist?" Mary asked as the two continued to fight. "You don't stand a chance of winning."

"I may not be able to win, but I sure as hell am taking half of you with me."

The replica's blue eyes met his, contemplation brooding behind them. She could see the truth in this young man's eyes. He would indeed kill her kindred as if they were nothing, for the most futile of outcomes. It wouldn't win him his freedom, it would not save his friends; he sought nothing more than slaughter in protest of his loss.

"A deal then," Mary stated. "Surrender and your friends live. I make no promises as to how Mohs will deal with them, but they live for now."

"Not on your-"

"Agreed." Jade cut the redhead off.

"Jade what are you-"

"Would you rather have everyone die?" The Colonel hissed in the redhead's ear, his patience having long since run thin. Jade grabbed Asch by the wrist twisting it until the Sword dropped from his grip. Asch's temper flared, yanking his arm away only to be defeated by the Colonel's firm grip. The fire behind his emerald eyes was immediately silenced by Jade's own fury. "Don't be so eager to throw your or any of our lives away," Jade continued as harshly as he had begun. "Even if everyone were ready and able to fight, this is not a confrontation where we're going to come out of on top. Stop fighting a losing battle and start considering the lives of the people around you."

"Let go of me!"
"I'm not letting you make this mistake. Give up now, and make your stand later," Jade demanded. Asch's green eyes met the ground in stubborn defeat. "Whatever you're losing now, you can get it back later. Start using your head before you get us all killed."

Asch sat back in the cell, the cold stone pressing against his back as he listened to the water dripping from the ceiling. Well if these weren't the oldest and most run down cells in Daath, he'd love to see which ones were worse. The lighting down here sucked too, nothing more than a few salvaged fonstones hanging from the walls, giving the entire dungeon an eerie glow. It was enough to see each other in the neighbouring cells, but not much more than that. Either the replicas really didn't want anyone to know they were down here, or they weren't taking any chances of them escaping.

It had been at least two days now they'd been locked in here, the only sign of other life were the Oracle Knights that periodically brought them food. There was no indication of what time of day it was, and they ultimately relied on Jade for a realistic guess as to how long they'd been locked up. The time passed mostly in silence, not that there wasn't anything to say, but the thick cell walls and the way sound carried made conversation between cells almost impossible unless they stood by the bars and raised their voices.

They had been locked up in pairs. Guy was in a cell with Jade and next to them were Natalia and Anise. Asch found himself in a cell with Tear across from Jade's and next to them were Luke and Ion. Anise had tried to start a conversation a few times but the guards on duty outside the dungeon had come in and put a stop to it and since then no one had bothered, keeping instead to the company they had. Tension among them was unbelievably high, so the fact that talking wasn't going to be permitted was a blessing in disguise.

Why bother? For all they knew, they'd just been put down here to die while Mohs and Van did Score knows what to the rest of the world. The Sword of Lorelei had been taken from him; Asch couldn't believe how badly he'd screwed up. Why had he been so stupid? He knew he shouldn't have followed along with everyone else. He dealt with all that crap from Luke and the others, and where did it put him? Nowhere.

"What are you brooding on now?" Tear asked, watching the redhead as he mulled over something or another. She felt bad, she'd barely said a word to him the whole time they'd been locked up together, finding it easier to watch him, or to ignore him in light of sorting through her own thoughts and feelings.

Tear wanted to talk to Asch, though experience told her that it wouldn't be an easy task. He wasn't talkative, if he ever could have been considered such. Still, she needed someone, something, to distract her from her thoughts and from what had transpired back at the valley. She'd barely gotten her feelings on her brother's survival settled... now this? It was just... impossible. In less than an hour she'd gone from being alone in the world to finding out two of her family members were still out there. And both were her enemies.

Was it really so hard to believe? Tear had known that her father died when someone had extracted his replica data, but it didn't lessen the shock in the least. She'd never known her father, but Van had told her so many stories about his kindness, firm but gentle, and always grateful for his blessings. A picture of him, her mother and Van as a child sat by her bedside, and she'd looked upon it almost every day of her sixteen years of life. She could still remember the days she'd yearned for nothing more than a chance to meet him, to get to know both her parents like Van did. To feel their warmth and their love as her brother once had.

An inaudible sigh escaped the melodist's lips, and she found herself fighting a wave of regret. Even
now, she would never know those things. It wasn't her father she had seen, but a replica. Still his face, hauntingly familiar as it was, evoked the same emotions from her had it been her father himself. It was shameful; she was soldier, to let her emotions impede her ability to fight to such an extent was unforgivable.

The most unforgivable thing of all was Mohs! How could he even consider such a thing? To use their own families and friends against them! Even Guy's sister... Poor Guy, he was still trying to come to terms with the memories her appearance had evoked and just from observing him, she could see how unsettled he still was. At least he was with the Colonel. All Jade's quirks aside, he had an amazing ability to locate the heart of an issue and help someone settle it. She stifled a soft chuckle, she could use one of his 'chats' herself right about now...

"Nothing," Asch replied, surprising Tear with an answer and pulling her from her thoughts. "I'm not thinking about anything." The redhead sighed, wondering why he'd given her an answer. He didn't want to speak with her, he just didn't want to deal with any more of their judgment; he was sick of it.

"Whatever you're thinking about, it isn't nothing," Tear said quietly.

"What makes you say that?"

"You're always thinking about something. You worry about everything, everyone, and about the future. When you're thinking so hard about something, it's almost always important."

"Did Luke tell you all that?" Asch asked bitterly.

"No, I know because that's the kind of person you are. That's why I don't understand."

"You don't understand why an ass like me has a replica as nice as Luke?" he snidely remarked, sending Tear a dirty look.

"No. I don't understand why someone who is as kind as you has resorted to such dirty tricks and cruel tactics. Maybe you are upset with Luke, but it doesn't give you the right to say things like you said back there. Luke isn't- They are not just replicas. That's exactly what my brother thinks."

"You're the last person I ever expected to have chastise me about a comment towards replicas." Asch cocked an eyebrow. Tear struggled to find a reply to the redhead's comment but he simply shook his head, his expression softening but still serious. "That comment wasn't what it sounded like...it wasn't what I meant. I wasn't trying to be cruel to Luke either. I didn't mean that replicas are worth any less than regular people; their lives are no more or less valuable than anyone else's. I was trying to point out that they're just replicas; they aren't the same people as their originals. Luke and I... we're perfect examples of that. Replicas don't have their originals' memories, the same bonds, the same personalities, nothing. They only look alike; they aren't the same people our friends once were. That's all I meant by what I said."

"Then why don't you tell Luke that?" the melodist suggested.

"He's not talking to me, besides, it's not like it would make a difference. It doesn't change anything."

"Asch, what happened between the two of you?"

"What, Luke didn't tell you all about it?"

"No, he didn't," the melodist answered as sharply as the question had been asked. Tear sighed, in
hindsight it was such a childish thing to do, and for such a stupid reason. Luke had just been trying to protect her feelings, but she had been so upset with him for lying to her. "You're not the only one who wasn't speaking with him."

"Hmph," Asch scoffed and turned his gaze to the dimly lit roof of their cell.

"If you don't want-"

"The God-Generals have been after the sword I have since we returned home from the Absorption Gate." Asch began quietly, cutting Tear off. "At first they confronted me when I was down in the city, never doing any more than talking. Then they started getting violent, trying to take the Sword by force. I could deal with them, and I didn't want anyone to worry. Luke was busy enough worrying about the missing Jewel and I didn't want him to get involved. The last thing I wanted was the God-Generals to use him as leverage."

Tear listened, and slowly she began to understand. Asch had been pushing Luke away, not out of hatred, but out of fear. He wanted it to look to the world like he didn't care, because if he didn't care then the leverage became useless and Luke would be safe. It had hurt Luke, but more than that, it had hurt Asch who knew full well what he was doing. Luke was Asch's weakness; the young monarch knew it. He knew he could never sit back if someone were to threaten his family, and so the God-Generals could get him to do whatever they wanted unless he did something to stop it.

"After that, they started with the threats," Asch continued. "It was then I decided it was too dangerous for Luke to stay in Baticul, it would be safer if he was off travelling and the God-Generals would have a harder time finding him. I knew he was lonely so it was easy to convince him to leave and visit everyone. Besides, I figured if he was with you guys, then he'd be safer. It hadn't been my intention to leave too, but Luke had barely gotten on the lift and left when Cantabile showed up." Asch's face darkened. "It scared me; they had never been bold enough to confront me anywhere near the castle or the manor before. That's when I knew I had to leave Baticul or everyone else would get caught up in my fight. So I left, without saying a word, and well, here we are. I'm sure Natalia told you the rest."

Tear nodded, smiling gently when Asch's emerald eyes met her own. How could they both be so different and yet so impossibly alike? Because they really were, in these rare moments, when for whatever reason Asch let down his guard, she saw that same gentle heart that she loved in Luke. Asch offered a sad smile grateful for her understanding, Tear was just glad the poor lighting hid what she knew must be her flushing cheeks. Impossibly alike...

A part of her wanted to ask again, to inquire why he didn't just tell Luke. This was nothing more than some big misunderstanding, right? There wasn't any reason for any hard feelings between them... but at the same time, there still was. The open wounds still seeped, and they both had the same stubborn pride. Luke resented being hurt, being disregarded when he felt he deserved Asch's trust; Asch couldn't accept Luke's anger, after all he'd sacrificed to protect his brother and to ensure his safety. They were both valid feelings, and in spite of all the pain it was going to bring them, neither regretted their choices.

Rise, fall, rise, fall, rise, fall...

Luke silently watched Ion's chest, carefully observing the rhythm of his breathing. It was faster than Luke would have liked, and definitely faster than it should be. The redhead cursed the ancient cells they'd been locked in and the icy breeze that seemed to sweep through the room every time one of the guards came or went. For two days now Luke had watched his friend, watched him toss
and turn, watched him quietly suffer as he continued to deteriorate. Time was endless here, oblivious to the existence of his friends, Luke could focus on nothing else but the boy before him who desperately needed help Luke could no longer offer.

Two days now... two days on top of the seemingly endless journey to Daath and Ion still hadn't fully woken up from his fateful arte in Tataroo Valley. Since then, Luke had ample time to confirm for himself exactly what Ion had done. There was no other explanation for the tainted Seventh Fonons that he could clearly sense within his friend, or for his sudden weakness. What it didn't explain though, was the fever or why he was suddenly getting worse much faster.

Luke had noticed it when he woke up in the cell with his ailing companion, and the fever had climbed in spite of his best attempts to help him. If only their stuff hadn't been taken away! At the very least he could use a proper compress rather than a torn strip of his shirt and the water they'd been left for breakfast. Still, what could he possibly do for Ion? Luke didn't know the first thing about medicine or these sorts of things, but it wasn't like he could get Natalia or Tear's help. No, what Ion needed was a doctor, and the sooner the better. Maybe he could hail down one of the guards when they brought supper? They wouldn't just leave the Fon Master to get even sicker in the rat's hole of a dungeon, right? He shouldn't even be here in the first place! None of them should! Some stupid inside traitors among the Oracle Knights had arranged for them to be held here despite the fact that Mohs shouldn't be within leagues of Daath. Hidden in the last place anyone would ever think to look for the missing Fon Master... damn them all!

Luke sighed, trying to dissipate his frustration at his own ineptitude. Getting worked up here wasn't going to make anything any better. The young noble sat down next to Ion and carefully shifted the Fon Master so he could lay in Luke's lap.

Ion stirred and his eyes cracked open. "Lu..."

"Shhh." Luke put a finger to his lips. "I think you're catching a cold, you need to save up your strength," he lied. Well it wasn't entirely a lie, Ion was catching something above and beyond whatever Tear had, but it was far from being something as benign as a cold. Ion nodded and returned to his slumber. Luke silently cursed. There had to be something he could do!

The door to the dungeon flew open and Luke did his best to shield Ion from the cold air that swirled around the room.

"Gloomietta," Anise spat at the seventeen-year old who walked in. "What are you doing here?"

Ignoring Anise altogether, the pink haired God-General made her way straight towards Luke's cell, one of her ligers not a foot behind her. Pulling out a set of keys, she unlocked the door and stepped into the cell. Never taking his eyes off of her, Luke shifted Ion from his lap and stood defensively in front of him.

"I want Ion," Arietta demanded.

"What are you crazy, Gloomietta?" Anise yelled. "I think those ligers of yours knocked a few screws loose. No way we're going to just hand over Ion!"


"No way Luke! Don't you dare think of letting her take him!" Anise shouted.

"It's none of your business," Arietta replied, her fierce gaze meeting Luke's.

"Fine," Luke conceded, carefully picking up the Fon Master from where he lay on the ground.
Arietta nodded and the liger that had followed her came into the cell and knelt down, allowing Luke to place Ion on its back.

"Luke, just what are you-" Guy's outraged cry was cut off by the slamming of the steel door as Arietta shut Luke's cell and promptly left the dungeon, leaving everyone in a state of shock at what had just transpired.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Anise's infuriated demand echoed in the now silent dungeon. "You can sit over there and be a sourpuss all you want but how dare you think you can get back at Asch by handing Ion over to her like that!" Luke didn't reply, but that didn't stop the fuming former Fon Master Guardian. "Arietta's a God-General, who knows what they're planning to do to him! He's not in any kind of condition to be-"

"Anise, stop," Guy intervened.

"Why should I? How can you be so calm when he just handed Ion over without a second thought?"

"Luke, how long has Ion been sick like that?" Guy asked.

"Wait, what do you mean sick?" Anise asked.

"You may not of seen him when they walked by, but Ion wasn't looking so hot."

"He's been getting worse since we got here, and his fever has been going up since yesterday," Luke stated sharply. "Arietta may be a God-General, but she's going to do a better job taking care of him than any of us possibly can from here." And with that Luke retreated to the back of his cell where the voices of the others became no more than murmurs in the distance.

Luke sat alone in his cell, an icy hand gripping his heart. Why did he feel so awful? He knew that Arietta wouldn't do anything to hurt Ion, and here in Daath there were more than ample doctors that could see to him and make sure he got better. Even with Master Van still alive, the Sephiroth were dead and all opened so they wouldn't use him for that. So why did he still feel so damn guilty! He pounded on the stone wall with his fist, revelling in the pain that shot through his hand, distracting him from his throat that seemed to be suffocating on the very air he breathed.

What was he thinking? Luke stopped mid-thought when he found himself instinctively reaching for his connection. Was that why he felt so bad? Guilt put off by his interminable concern for his ailing friend that was all too happy to resurge now that Ion was in safe hands. No! He didn't need Asch... even if he didn't have Tear... even if he didn't have anyone! He could do this, no matter how much it hurt. He was going to take responsibility for his choices. He'd sworn he would stand on his own!

The dungeon door flew open; the sound of steel crashing against the stone wall resonated snapping everyone out of whatever thoughts or conversations they had been entertaining. Luke's attention was drawn to the furious God-General that flew back into the dungeon for the second time, still with her liger, but Ion was gone.

"What did you do to Ion?" Arietta demanded, standing in front of Luke's cell.

"Don't start with us Gloomietta!" Anise protested. "After all the times you-"

"I wasn't talking to you!" Arietta snapped, cutting Anise off. The liger growled at her, echoing its master's feelings. The God- General's narrowed pink eyes returned to Luke, silently repeating the question, but with less sharpness than before. Why was he the one she seemed interested in?
Maybe he was imagining it, but she seemed to trust him a bit more. Was it because he had been the one taking care of Ion?

"What happened to Ion?" She repeated the question.

For a brief moment, Luke debated telling her the truth, revealing what Ion had done and what the real problem was but he stopped before the first word came out. Even if he did say something, what could Arietta, or anyone else do for that matter? It would just leave Tear feeling guilty, and without any reasons to offer. Luke didn't even know why Ion had done it... besides, was it even his right to say?

"He's used a Daathi Fonic arte," Luke finally replied. "He got sick because he's been stuck in this wet and cold cell while he was so weak."

Arietta pondered for a moment, her pink eyes analyzing the boy before her, gauging him against some unknown measure. Luke stood defensively, just in case she was evaluating how good of a liger chew toy he'd make, but whatever she was looking for and whether or not she'd found it would remain a mystery. Her expression softened a bit, still serious but without the hatred Luke had become so accustomed to seeing.

"If you promise to leave Ion with me in Daath, I'll let you all out of here."

"No way! Don't listen to her Luke, she's lying!" Anise cut in. "There's no way she's going to let us go!"

"Shut up Anise! Mohs is the one keeping you locked in here," Arietta shot. "Unlike you, I have no obligations to that pig. If I leave you to escape on your own, then you're going to take Ion away to get sick and hurt again! This way he can stay here where he'll be safe! So what do you want? Will you leave Ion here?"

"It doesn't matter what we think," Luke answered firmly. "What does Ion want?"

"I..." Arietta was taken aback by the question. "I don't know."

"Then perhaps you should ask him," Jade suggested slyly. "And to be sure you don't lie about his answer; one of us should accompany you."

"How do I know you won't try anything?" The God-General demanded.

"We could say the same. It's far too easy for you to tell us that Ion wants to stay, regardless of what his actual wishes are." The Colonel shrugged. "You choose who will go with you then," he offered. "Regardless, they won't risk trying anything since it still leaves the rest of us locked down here."


Jade sighed but wasn't surprised at her choice. Part of him had hoped she would pick someone like himself or Tear who would have the sense to take advantage of the situation, especially given that with Ion's nature it was unlikely he'd concede to being left behind unless he felt there was no other option. He wouldn't bring his health into the consideration at all; Ion always had been rather stubborn in that regard. That had been foolish, it was obvious Luke would be her choice, spurred by his willingness to cooperate earlier no doubt. Jade only hoped Luke would have enough sense to find a way to get them all out of this situation before things got any worse.

Luke had been in Ion's room only once before, ironically also with Arietta when they had come to
save Ion after Cantabile had taken him; but at that point Arietta was fighting against them and he really hadn't had the time to take in his surroundings. The Fon Master's room was unbelievably bare. Luke found himself sitting on the end of Ion's bed while Arietta had claimed the only chair, sitting next to Ion and periodically changing his compress.

Though he'd only been up here a short while, Ion already looked like he was starting to improve. Arietta had one of the medics come up and give him a concoction for his fever that also quieted his cough. His fever seemed to be abating and his breathing had slowed to something resembling normal. Luke had to give it to his friend, Ion really could sleep through anything. The smell of that medicine alone made him want to gag, but Ion had barely woken enough to swallow it before he returned to his slumber. At least... Luke hoped it was slumber, the alternatives weren't something he wanted to consider, even if he knew it was the truth. Ion was dying, just not quite yet... he hoped.

For all that it was an important matter at hand, neither Luke nor Arietta had it in them to wake Ion up, so Luke sat in silence, watching the young God-General take care of the boy she seemed to cherish so dearly. Arietta really wasn't a bad person, was she? She just loved someone she didn't know had died, and had lost the only family she had ever known.

"Asch told me what we did to your mom," Luke said quietly. "I'm sorry. If I had-"

"Don't," Arietta cut him off. "I don't want to hear it from you. Don't talk about my mommy."

"Are you really going to let us go?"

"If Ion stays, then yes. I don't have any obligations to Mohs, especially after everything he did to Ion. All that matters to me is that Ion stays safe and away from Anise and all of you! He never got sick like this until Anise became his Guardian. He never used to be like this at all."

A realization dawned on Luke... she was talking about the original Ion. Ion's original wouldn't have gotten sick when using Daathic Fonic artes... and from what Luke knew about him, he wasn't anything like Ion was. He was the one that had helped Master Van come up with his plans to destroy the Score.

"What was he like back then?" Luke asked.

"Ion was the one who saved me from the bad men, the ones that had taken me away from my mommy. He didn't hurt me like they had, instead he taught me how to understand everyone and he always protected me. He valued his own life and those of his friends more than anything! He never would have sacrificed himself for a bunch of strangers like this. I don't... I don't understand why he changed."

It was so cruel, Luke watched Arietta with pity. All this time, Master Van hadn't told her that the original Ion had died. He was using her love for him to achieve his own ends, stringing her along with the Ion that was Luke's friend, leading her to believe he was someone that he wasn't. It just... it wasn't fair to any of them.

*Something of that nature is not for us to say.*

"Maybe..." Luke managed, "Maybe when it came down to choosing between his friends and himself, he decided that he wanted protect the people important to him more."

"What do you mean?"

"Ion is putting himself on the line, not for the millions of strangers out there but for people like you..."
and Anise that are important to him. So you'll have a world to live in and enjoy together in the future."

"Arietta..." Ion's weak voice drew both Luke and the God-General's attention. "Luke, what are the two of you doing here?" he asked worriedly. "Where are the others?"

"Relax Ion," Luke smiled warmly. "We were captured by Mohs' soldiers, you're in Daath now, in your room. The others are still locked in one of the dungeons. You got pretty sick so Arietta has been taking care of you."

"I made them a deal," Arietta explained. "I told them if they let you stay here, then I'd let them out, but they said they wanted to ask you what you wanted to do."

"Luke, what is it that you want to do?" Ion asked, trying to sit himself up.

"No," Luke shook his head. "It's your decision. If you want to come with us, I'll go back down in that cell and we'll come up with something else. It's your choice."

"It's alright, I can stay." Ion smiled and a fit of coughing had Arietta forcing him to lie back down. "I wouldn't want to slow you down being sick like this. Once I'm better I'll do some research into a few matters for you, so don't worry about me."

"Alright then," Arietta nodded happily. "You go back to sleep and don't worry, I'll make sure everyone takes really good care of you!"

"Arietta..." Luke said hesitantly. "Can I talk to Ion alone for a minute?"

"He said he'd stay, don't you dare try to-"

"I'm not trying to convince him to come or planning anything," Luke cut her off. "There's just something private I want to ask Ion about. If Ion is okay with sharing it, he can tell you what we talked about later."

"Please Arietta," Ion asked. "I promise I don't intend to leave with them."

"Alright," Arietta conceded. "But I'm not going any further than your office! I won't have you take him away by force!"


"I don't believe the words of murderers!" Arietta shot back, slamming the door behind her.

"Please don't think too badly of her," Ion spoke up but Luke shook his head.

"It's okay, I can understand."

"What is it you wanted to discuss, Luke?" Ion tried again to sit up. This time Luke helped him, propping him against the extra pillows Arietta had had someone fetch. Luke sat on the chair the God-General had vacated.

"Back in Tataroo Valley... why did you do it?"

"Why did I do what?" Ion smiled, betraying a hint of confusion.

"You know what I mean. You didn't really cure Tear, did you? You took the tainted fonons into yourself."
"So you noticed."

"I was the one who carried you after you collapsed. You feel the same way she did, I can sense the contaminated Seventh Fonons," Luke explained.

"I guess that makes sense since you're an isofon of Lorelei, you're especially sensitive to the Seventh Fonon," Ion said sadly.

"But I don't understand why! Why would you do that?"

"I may be Fon Master, but I've always been weak. As a replica, I don't have the full abilities my original did. It's not likely I would have lived a very long life to begin with. My body already bears burden from all that my duties require of me. Tear has a long life ahead of her, and shouldn't have to deal with such a thing."

"But what about the Order of Lorelei? What would they do without you? If you die, they're going to go back to the Score. Then all the work you've done, it would have all been for nothing!"

"No, the faith of the people is strong and they can learn to live on their own, without the Score. There are many people in the Order right now who are working hard not to let it fail and to make that dream a reality. I truly believe that people can learn to change."

"Still... why, why would you..." Luke choked out his words through the tears that were threatening to form. How could Ion... how could he think those things? And to say them, all while smiling.

"Tear is a descendant of Yulia, and she has the Fonic hymns. I believe that Tear will be a key to freeing Lorelei, and to saving this world. And because... and because you're happy when you're with Tear, and I want you to be happy."

"You're such an idiot!" Luke took Ion in his arms. Ion felt Luke sobbing, his warm tears landing on the Fon Master's shoulder, leaving him speechless. "I was happy travelling with you too."

"I just," Ion's voice was no longer calm and steady as it usually was, Luke emotions slowly seeping into him. "I was created to be the Fon Master by Van and Mohs... I wanted my life to have more meaning than simply the purpose for which I was created."

"It does...you're my friend."

"Thank you, Luke." Ion detached himself from his comrade, using his thumb to wipe a tear from Luke's cheek. Ion smiled sadly, but he wondered. Luke's feelings made him so happy, and yet he was filled with such sadness. He'd never felt these kinds of emotions before... all he knew was that Luke's friendship brought him such joy, and he was grateful for his friend's feelings. To know someone cared for him enough to shed tears for him. He didn't know how to begin to express how he felt. So Ion simply continued to smile, hoping that his life could allow his friends to do the same.

"If I may," Ion began, sinking down into the pillows as weariness began to settle over him. "Can I ask something selfish of you, Luke?"

"Of course, anything."

"Please don't tell the others... especially Anise. She wouldn't understand, and I don't want them to worry."

"Alright," Luke conceded after a moment's thought. He didn't... he didn't like it, but it was Ion's
"Thank you," Ion smiled. "Hopefully I'll regain my strength soon and will be able to provide you with some more helpful information."

"Don't push yourself," Luke warned, a smile coming to his face as he remembered exactly who he was talking to. He wiped his eyes, he was being stupid... after all, the doctor had said to Tear that she'd be fine as long as there wasn't any more exposure to the miasma, so the same should hold true for Ion too, right? Ion could still have a long life ahead of him, he'd just be carrying the burden of that illness. It was just the fact that he'd gotten sick that had scared Luke so badly. Ion would be just fine! He'd be weaker than before... but he'd still be alright.

A soft knock came from the door. Ion's eyes turned to Luke, fighting against the slumber that was calling him. "Could you let Arietta back in? Unless there's something else you wanted to discuss?"

"No, that was all." Luke stood up and straightened himself out before opening the door, allowing the God-General into the room.

"Sorry Ion, but there's a message here for you from Teodoro," Arietta said.

"Thank you, could you please give it to Luke? Since I'll be remaining here, Luke and his friends will have to deal with those issues." Arietta handed Luke the envelope without any kind of resistance or contempt. Luke almost chuckled. As long as Ion was staying it was good enough for her.

"I'm sorry to ask all this of you..." Ion trailed off.

"Don't worry about it Ion," Luke dismissed his concerns. "You've done plenty for us already. You just worry about getting better; we'll take care of the rest."

"Please hurry... something terrible is... coming..."

"Ion, what-?" Luke cut himself off. Ion had fallen asleep again. But just what did he mean?

"What did you talk about?" Arietta demanded as soon as the two of them had slipped out into Ion's office.

"Sorry, Ion asked me not to tell," the young noble replied. "You'll have to ask him later if he wants to tell you."

"As long as he stays, I'll set you and your friends free. Don't think I won't come after you if he sneaks off later!"

Luke looked back at the door to Ion's room. "Don't worry, he'll stay."

"Fine, then let's go pick up your stuff, then you can go do whatever you want."

"Even Asch's stuff?" Luke inquired hesitantly. The last thing he wanted was to point out her oversight.

"Hmph," Arietta grinned. "It's a good thing Cantabile and Legretta refused to let me help them look for the Key of Lorelei. Now let's go before the shift change is over. I could only sneak my squad members in for so many shifts on guard duty down there."

Luke followed the young God-General back down the stairs to where his friends were being held,
almost in awe at the 'convenience' of the set up. Arietta had planned this all out in advance, and put a lot of effort to holding up her end of the deal... all to protect the person she cared for. Luke smiled.

No... she wasn't a bad person at all.
The Rules of War

The stairs up out of Daath's depths were unending. The older, underground levels of the great cathedral hadn't been equipped with the fonic glyphs that made moving about the upper levels easier. Just how deep did this building stretch below the surface anyways? The gloomy corridors, sparsely lit by the odd fonstone seemed to twist and turn, identical doors lining every hallway... it was wonder anyone knew where they were going. Guy stopped and almost grinned in spite of himself; if he keeps this up he'll start sounding like Luke pretty soon.

Not that he would ever really fault Luke for that; come to think of it, it had been a long time since he'd heard his best friend whine about anything. He made a mental note to talk to Luke about that later. Not that it was a really bad thing that Luke wasn't complaining about everything, but Guy knew his little quirks. Luke tended to complain out of boredom, when his mind had nothing else to do but find fault in the various things around him. The sudden lack was just a sign of how high strung he was.

Not that Guy himself was really in the position to help Luke feel better about everything. He was still in the midst of sorting through the mess of feelings his memories had invoked. Old memories begot old thoughts and with them old desires. Luke and Asch had nothing to do with any of it, that wasn't even a thought he would dwell on, but that small part of him that still desired revenge lay buried in the depths of his psyche. That scared little boy, all alone, crying out at the pain... at the memories of his sister's death. He'd watched her die; her and all the maids that had taken care of him. Guy was starting to understand why he'd subconsciously blocked out that moment of his life.

That was the past, and no matter how much resentment he may still harbour towards what had happened, Guy knew that he couldn't let that take away the future. That was what Van had- no, he supposed he'd have to scratch that now; it was what Van was trying to do. It was going to take a bit to fully process the fact that his former friend was still alive. Really now, that was quite the wild card those two had kept up their sleeves. It surprised him, not so much from Asch, but Luke had clammed up about it too. Even if he was keeping a secret, his best friend usually gave off little hints, signs that there was something to which he wasn't fessing up. Knowing how to pick up on those had become more than essential to surviving Luke's younger years. Then again, Guy really hadn't been there to pick up on those things this time around. Times changed, but the desire for the past always lingered to some extent.

How much did he really long for the old days? Given the choice, would he return to Hod? Return to the times he had spent with Van and Cantabile, to Mary scolding him for causing trouble, then making up for it later by reading him a bedtime story... Guy let out a sigh. Mary... he really didn't know what to make of the replicas that had confronted them. At least he'd had Jade over the past few days to help him keep things in perspective, if nothing else; not that it had spared him Jade's own thoughts on how everything had played out. Bitter didn't quite suit the Colonel's attitude, but since existing vocabulary lacked the words to describe any of Jade's mannerisms, it was as close as he was going to get. Guy could understand, and even relate to some extent. It had been foolish and idiotic of all of them, and it had been pure chance alone that had gotten them out of this alive. He knew he couldn't let events repeat themselves; they couldn't afford to lose next time. He couldn't hesitate. But could he really fight his sister, even if it was only her likeness?

Guy looked up to see Luke looking at him curiously; upon meeting his worried look, the redhead offered his friend a comforting smile. Guy returned the gesture, knowing that look in Luke's eyes; looks like they'd be chatting later after all. Apparently he wasn't the only one that had picked up on their best friend's little quirks.
For the time being everyone was walking in silence. No one knew quite what to say, especially with Arietta still escorting them out of Daath. She was one who'd really surprised Guy, and he couldn't quite figure out what she was after. Really, if she just wanted Ion, she could have just taken him and there wasn't a thing any of them could have done about it. Her bargain wasn't a solution she'd decided upon on a whim either. Everything had been too carefully planned, the way all the guards happened to be from her squad, that many of the other knights who might have impeded them were conveniently away for training... no she had planned this ahead of time, maybe even as soon as they'd arrived. But why? She'd even gone and returned Asch's sword to him... the same one that the God-Generals were supposedly after. What was she planning?

The main lobby of the cathedral was a more than welcome sight and Guy for one would be perfectly happy not to see another set of stairs for a very long time. An eerie feeling made the hairs on the back of the blond's neck stand up. The air was stagnant, silence reverberating from the walls only emphasizing the lack of life. What the hell... based on the timing of the meals that their captors had provided it should still be the middle of the afternoon, the time at which the cathedral was usually teeming with people.

"Where is everybody?" Anise asked. "It's busier in here when the cathedral is closed for the day!"

"I don't know," Arietta replied, also surprised by the acute lack of people.

"There were more people when we passed through here earlier," Luke provided. "I wonder where they all went."

"Is it just me, or does it seem a bit stuffy in here?" Natalia inquired.

"Yeah, now that you mention it, it is a bit stifling," Guy agreed, noting a bit of a haze that seemed to hang in the air. "Maybe that's why people left."

"Ugh, that stupid Dist," the God-General grumbled. "Even when he isn't here, his labs are always making a mess! I bet they set something on fire again!"

"That looks like a running theme," Asch commented with a grin. He couldn't fault them entirely; their fires had helped him escape last time.

"Yeah, almost as running a theme as Gloomietta's pets running wild," Anise added with a sneer.

"Shut up Anise!" Arietta's voice echoed and everyone fell silent, unable to quite shake off the almost harrowing atmosphere. "What are you waiting for?" Arietta snapped. "Get out of here, before I throw you back in the dungeon!"

"What are you talking about? I'm not leaving Ion here with you. What do you think I am, stupid? Who knows what you'll do to him once we're gone!"


"I didn't say I was taking him anywhere," Anise argued. "But I'm not leaving Daath until he leaves with me."

"No way!" Arietta jumped in before anyone else had a chance to protest Anise's decision. "I'm not letting you anywhere near Ion. It's your fault he's like this to begin with! If you'd done your job right, he wouldn't be so weak and so sick!"

"Oh yeah? Just try and stop me!"
"You no longer have a position in the Order," Arietta pointed out. "I'm not giving you access to the upper levels, and I'll make sure no one else does either! Stay all you want, but you're not getting near Ion!"

"Anise," Natalia placed a hand on the fuming girl's shoulder. "Why don't you leave Ion here to get better, and come with us? I'm sure Arietta and everyone here in Daath will take good care of him. Once he's better you can come back and deal with him directly."

"Fine." Anise spat bitterly. She hated it! She should be the one there for Ion when he was sick! But Arietta was right and without any kind of position in the Order, there was no way she was going to get clearance to the Fon Master's chambers, especially with a God-General working against her. Besides... Ion would have wanted her to keep going and help everyone. "But I'll be back so don't you dare think of trying anything funny!"

"Unlike you, I'm actually going to take care of Ion! I'll protect him no matter what! So don't bother ever coming back!" Arietta shouted over her shoulder as she ran off towards the cathedral's inner, restricted areas.

"She's not too bad, for a God-General," Guy remarked.

"Yeah," Luke agreed. "But she's got a point; we'd better get going before someone who knows we shouldn't be here shows."

Arietta patiently watched from the shadows until she saw Luke opening the cathedral doors. Satisfied enough that they weren't going to return for Ion, she spun around and headed towards the kitchens. First she would have them prepare a good bowl of stew for him, and maybe by then the doctor would be by. She'd have Ion in tip top shape in no time! It was the least she could do after everything he'd always done for her.

Do you want to be my Fon Master Guardian?

Piercing green eyes stared at her, but their darkness only spurred the elation she felt at the sound of those words. Words she could understand now, she could use to express her feelings... maybe she wasn't very good at it yet, but it didn't matter! She would keep trying her hardest! They were the words he had given her...

"A Fon Master Guardian is someone who protects the Fon Master, even if it means losing their own life," Ion explained.

The pink haired girl simply smiled. "When Arietta was little, she was saved from being lonely. If Arietta cried, mommy was there and all my brothers and sisters were there. But they aren't there anymore. But... Arietta isn't lonely. Because Master Ion is here now! I want to protect Master Ion, just like my brothers and sisters protected me!"

"Fine then, from now on you will be a Fon Master Guardian," Ion said firmly. "If you become weak, you will be discarded immediately. Do you understand?"

"Yes Master Ion! Arietta understands."

From now on, Arietta will always be by Fon Master Ion's side.

Yes... things would be back to the way they were in no time...
“Hey there kiddo,” a voice came from the hallway the God-General had just past.

“I am not a child, Cantabile!” Arietta snapped back. “What are you doing here?”

“What’s with a reception like that?” Cantabile asked, pretending to look hurt. “Why don’t you come join the rest of us rather than stay all by yourself in Daath?”

“I told you, I’m staying here with Ion!”

“Well whatever,” the violet haired God-General shrugged. “It’s your choice where you want to stay, but that doesn’t get you out of your responsibilities.”

“I know that,” Arietta spat.

“Good,” Cantabile grinned, a look of utter satisfaction sweeping across her face. “Cause I’ve got a job for you.”

What… what was this? Luke arms trembled, frozen where they had extended to push open the massive doors that barred the cathedral. A cool breeze blew past him, tossing his red hair about as he remained frozen in shock at the sight he’d come upon. The young noble had been unsettled since Ion's unusual warning, but this was far worse than anything he could have ever imagined. The feeling of his heart stone cold in his stomach was becoming an all too familiar one.

“This is…” Natalia managed, their entire group slowly moving outside, all of them in disbelief at what had developed while they had been locked below ground. She looked about, but her visibility was poor at best given the dark purple haze that hung in the air, permeating the entire city. The only thing worse than the sight before them, was the knowledge that Daath wasn't the only place affected.

“No wonder it was so stuffy inside,” Guy commented solemnly. “The miasma was slowly leaking in.”

“How does something like this happen?” Asch demanded. “I thought you’d said we trapped the miasma below the dividing line, old man!” Jade remained silent. “Well, Jade?”


“Oh yeah? Well then explain to me what the hell is going on here!”

“Stop it, both of you,” Natalia intervened. “We knew that this was a possibility, assigning the blame isn't going to get us anywhere!”

“Spinoza had theories about the miasma returning, right?” Guy asked. “Did he have any ideas on how to get rid of it?”

“What are you guys talking about?” Asch demanded.

“Hey, if you're going to take off without us, don't expect to be in the loop,” Luke shot.

“Go crawl under a rock and die,” Asch shot back.

“No, unfortunately not,” Jade answered, ignoring the twin's bickering that only picked up in intensity while the attention was drawn towards the Malkuth Colonel. “The miasma is likely spreading from the Radiation Gate as a result of the added stress the Planet Storm is putting on the dividing line, but there isn't any way of stopping it, especially at this point.”
"There has to be something we can do…" Natalia mulled.

"What do you think we can do?" Asch asked bitterly, still shooting evil stares at his immature sibling. Still, it was easier than dwelling on the miasma that surrounded him, an eerie fog whose very touch unsettled him. Damn it all this was all his fault! If only he'd been able to free Lorelei, none of this would be happening! Lorelei had warned them that this would happen if he stayed in the core… now it was too late. "Even if we could stop it from escaping the core, we can't get rid of the miasma that's already here! There's nothing we can do, we can't even get away from it!"

"Asch!" The young princess snapped. "What has gotten into you? Weren't you the one who told me that just because we don't know of a way to get rid of the miasma, doesn't mean there isn't one? That as long as people are alive, they can still work towards a better tomorrow?"

Asch looked away, offering no response.

"Figures," Luke rolled his eyes, getting a more than dirty look from his sibling.

"Jade, what's the matter?" Guy noticed the look on Jade's face, and it only ever meant one thing.

"Things are moving much quicker than I had expected. Unfortunately Asch is right, at this rate, the miasma will soon infiltrate the buildings and there will be no escaping it. I don't, however, agree that there are no other options than accepting death. My concern is why things have suddenly accelerated… even based on Spinoza's model, this is too soon."

"Could something have happened to Lorelei?" Natalia inquired.

"Luke, Asch," Jade turned to the boys who looked like they were ready to pull their weapons on each other. "Have either of you ever tried to speak with Lorelei without having him initiate the contact?"

"No," both of them admitted simultaneously before glaring at each other.

"Well then, there's a project for you," the Colonel stated. "Make some good use of those fon slots of yours, since you're obviously not planning to talk to each other."

"What are you thinking, Colonel?" Tear inquired worriedly.

"You think Master Van may have already trapped or captured Lorelei?" Luke suggested.

"That is a very distinct possibility," Jade agreed. "But we've too little do go on at this point, so the two of you had best get to work," he added tauntingly. Luke scoffed and raised an eyebrow but the concentration hidden behind his green eyes betrayed that he was already giving it a shot.

"There is something I find odd," Natalia pondered.

"What's that?" Tear asked.

"Well, where is everyone? I would think that at a time like this, there would be more people than ever in Daath. Whether they be looking for guidance, or demanding the Score… there should be more people here."

"That's true," Tear agreed. "The miasma has only been around for a couple days at most, but at the very least the locals or people already visiting Daath should be around."

"Hey… guys?" Anise turned back to face her friends from where she was standing at the top of the
long staircase that led down into the city. "I think I found everyone... and we might have a problem."

"Poison has seeped out from Gnome's domain, spread across the world and even now begins to challenge the lives of the ill and the elderly! Why is this happening, you ask? It is because the world has strayed from the Score! We have moved from a path of prosperity to one of destruction!"

"Damn it! Mohs!" Luke cursed. It looked like half of Daath had turned out to listen to him, the streets were packed with people all watching the snake before them with starry eyes. That bastard! After everything he'd done-

"Luke, stop." Jade grabbed the redhead's arm before he could get too far. "The last thing we need right now is a riot. If we attack Mohs, we'll be the ones who will be discredited and that crowd will likely turn on us."

"The New Order of Lorelei is devoting itself to getting the world back on the path of prosperity that the Score has promised us!" Mohs continued. The crowd was muttering, nodding in agreement and slowly beginning to cheer the former Grand Maestro on. "Straying from the Score was a mistake and look where it has brought us! Yulia knew that the Score would lead to prosperity, but we were ignorant enough to think we knew better than she! Let the New Order of Lorelei lead the way to a future of prosperity!"

"Damn," Guy commented as the crowd cheered. "He's really got himself their support."

"Can you blame them?" Natalia asked. "Given everything that's happened, and just how little the people know about reasons behind the fall of the Outer Lands, it's no surprise they're so easily swayed by his logic. It's sound by their judgement."

"But the Score is wrong!" Anise protested.

"People believe things up until now were in the Closed Score," Tear pointed out. "After so long of leaning on the Score, it's difficult for people to stand on their own, especially when times become difficult and uncertain. That's what the Major said... I wonder, is it really possible for the world to escape the Score?"

"We won't be able to unless we believe that we can!"

"Luke..."

"We can't give up now just because things are a bad, it's in times like these that we have to try our hardest! We have to set an example for everyone else, us and all the nobility. As the ones people are going to look to; we have to able to properly handle these kinds of situations."

"You're right Luke," Natalia agreed. "This will be a test to see if the world can come together to overcome a common obstacle, and a test of how well we manage our people."

"Yes, we have to be willing to try." Tear smiled. "Luke, I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry," Luke countered. "What you said before was true, I didn't have the right to go behind your back like that, and I shouldn't have lied about Master Van."

"It's okay, I think I know why you did. But next time, I want you to trust me."

Luke smiled in defeat, "I will."
Asch let out a very audible scoff. Luke's expression changed in a heartbeat, sending the nastiest look any of them had ever seen on the normally temperate noble. "What do you want?" he demanded.

"Nothing," Asch dismissed the glare casually. "You change your tune pretty quick."

"At least I'm mature enough to admit I made a mistake," Luke said defensively.

"Don't you get me started on the subject of maturity."

"Yeah, you'll lose as soon as you go there," Guy muttered under his breath.

"Do you have something to say to me?"

"Will you guys all shut up?" Anise snapped. "We've got enough trouble coming without your squabbling," she hissed, nodding her head towards Mohs who was making his way up the stairs.

"Well, well, well," Mohs began, an evil smirk spreading across his face. The pompous man reached the top of the stairs and stood beside Anise sending her backwards several paces, never losing her defensive stance. "If it isn't the traitor."

"And proud of it!" She countered, sticking her tongue out.

"Yes, well, I'm sure your parents met an appropriate end in a ditch somewhere none-the-less," Mohs continued slyly.

"You bastard!"

"Anise, don't!" Luke snatched the former Fon Master Guardian's arm as she reached for Tokunaga. "There'll be a chance, but it isn't now."

"Who released you?" Mohs asked, still overflowing with arrogance and authority. "Was it Tritheim?"

"We were released on the Fon Master's orders," Tear declared.

"Tch," Mohs spat. "Ion has outlived his usefulness. A Fon Master that won't follow the Score is a disgrace. An Order without its foundations is nothing! It cannot serve the people, and it cannot find prosperity! You'd do well to stop following that idiot of a Fon Master before you regret it. The New Order of Lorelei will lead the way to the future."

"Say one more word about Ion and so help me Lorelei I'll-" Anise's small fists were clenched and trembling.

"You'll what? Powerless fool."

Anise bit her lip; her entire face was red around her flaming brown eyes. For Ion... she was doing this for Ion... He wasn't in the condition to deal with the consequences of her actions; he wouldn't be able to handle all the angry people if she did anything here and now. But she was going to have that man's intestines on a stick the next time he so much as thought of crossing their path. Just let anyone try and stop her!

"No matter," Mohs dismissed the entire group before him. "Everything is moving, there's nothing any of you can do to stop it now. Mark my words, I, the Fon Master of the New Order of Lorelei will be the one to save this world. Nothing you can do will change that."
"He's not so brave without his little army, is he?" Anise shot after him once he was out of an earshot. "Bastard, how dare he think he can say that stuff about Ion! I'm going to kill him!"

"This 'New Order of Lorelei' of his concerns me as well," Natalia confessed.

"Yeah," Asch agreed. "It's going to have more than a few political implications, especially if this is any example of the people's reception to it. Things are unstable enough as it is, the last thing we need is a power struggle between Ion and Mohs on this scale."

"Especially if Mohs' goal is truly to start a war as the Score foretells."

"So then, what are we going to do about it?" Luke asked.

"I think we ought to propose a summit between the world leaders," Natalia suggested. "There are more than a few world affairs that need to be discussed, not the least of which being how to deal with the miasma. If we can solidify the two country's relationship it'll make Mohs' task much more difficult."

"If we're going to go that route, then we're going to have to start by proving Asch's innocence," Guy pointed out. "As far as Kimlasca is concerned, he's behind the attacks on Malkuth. King Ingobert and Emperor Peony may be prepared to talk, but the Malkuth court isn't going to have it until Asch is officially dealt with. Besides, going into this, there should be no doubts as to what Mohs' true intentions are."

"That's great and all, but how are we going to do that?" Anise asked. "I mean, we know it's Mohs, but how are we going to prove it?"

"We'll have to find where he's making the replicas," Luke stated. "If he was using the replicas to impersonate soldiers, then they probably have some old military equipment stored around the facility, right?"

"So we're back to combing the ocean, huh?" Guy sighed.

"Not quite," Luke said, the beginnings of a smirk curling at his lips. The redhead held up a white paper and envelope in his left hand. "This came for Ion from Teodoro while I was up there. He says that the location of the Seventh Fonon consumption actually seems to be circling Yulia City."

"Uh, no offense or anything," Anise began, "but you seem to missing a very important fact. I don't see Noelle or Ginji around anywhere. How do you plan on looking for this facility?"

"Really?" Jade asked with a grin. "I do."

"What?"

"Guy, Luke!" Noelle exclaimed in surprise, her older brother nearly crashing into her after her sudden stop.

"Asch, everyone!" Ginji stopped to catch his breath. "What happened? Are you all okay? How did you escape?"

"We thought we were going to have to rescue you," Noelle explained. "When you didn't-"

"Master!" A ball of blue fur leapt from Noelle's arms and crashed into Luke's chest. "I'm so sorry Master! I should have come with you to protect you!"
A smile spread across Luke's face and he pet the young cheagle on the head. "It's okay, Mieu. If you'd been here then Arietta might have fed you to one of her ligers. It's probably a good thing you stayed in the Albiore."

"I'm not staying behind anymore!" Mieu declared, perching himself proudly on Luke's shoulder.

"Alright," Luke conceded. "But what are the two of you doing here?" He asked the pilots.

"We should be the one's asking you that, we came to rescue you," Noelle said. "When you didn't come back I started searching for you guys."

"We ran into each other," Ginji confessed with a nervous chuckle. "When we realized both Asch and everyone else was missing we figured something was probably up, so we found the landship they were transporting you in and followed it here. We were going to come rescue you but..."

"Yeah, you guys took the wind out of our sails," Noelle giggled.

"Well, I'm glad you didn't have to put yourselves in danger for us," Guy said. "I didn't realize you two were so reckless. What did you plan to do if you ran into some of the guards?" Guy noticed the dagger that the blonde pilot was clutching in her hands, her grasp tightened at the question. It was the one he'd given her in Sheridan... Guy dropped the subject.

"Colonel, what's the matter?" Anise carefully approached Jade. It wasn't often he got lost in thought, something really must be up. She wasn't sure she even wanted to know, the miasma was bad enough, let alone anything that had the Colonel thinking so hard.

"Luke, Asch, have either of you heard anything from Lorelei since lowering the Outer Lands?" Jade inquired.


"This is really bothering you, isn't it Jade?" Guy pointed out.

"The chances that something has occurred to Lorelei are high, especially given the Planet Storm has reached the point that the miasma has returned," he explained. "And in case you've forgotten, if the Planet Storm reaches a critical velocity, the Tartarus will no longer be able to neutralize the vibrations in the core and the lands will all sink into the mantle."

"All the more reason we need to free Lorelei," Asch pointed out.

"But can we?" Luke wondered. "I mean, if Master Van did something to him, are we still even able to free him?"

"Now who's being a pessimist, Mr. We-won't-know-until-we-try?"

"You just can't resist, can you?" Luke shot angrily.

"Well forgive me for telling the truth."

"It would be the first time..." the younger sibling muttered.

"Well if we're working on trying new things, why don't you try shutting up?"

"Oh so I've got the big mouth now?" Luke asked. "Because if I remember correctly in Tataroo Valley I wasn't the one being an ass to the people who were just worried about him!"
"Oh yeah, you were real worried. That's why you attacked me as soon as you saw me!"

"That's enough! Both of you!" Tear stepped between the flaming redheads before the shots started aiming for vital points. The looks on their faces told everyone that was what was coming next and as soon as it got personal things were bound to get ugly.

"I've had just about enough of you both," Jade stated sternly. "Guy, Luke, Tear and Anise, with Ginji if you will. Asch, Natalia, you will accompany me and we will depart with Noelle. It will be faster to find this mobile facility with two ships looking. I am not dealing with your bickering," he added, bringing a hand up to adjust his glasses ominously. "If you don't intend to reconcile then you will learn to be civil or I will see to it that educational gap is filled... personally."

The looming threat silenced both boys and they wordlessly went their separate ways.

Natalia found herself standing outside the door to Asch's room. Things had been unusually quiet with only the four of them on the Albiore and silence had always done a fine job of entertaining her guilt. The princess' fiancé hadn't left his room since they'd begun their flight in search of some sort of mobile fomicry facility and his continued absence was beginning to concern her. They needed to talk; it was far beyond the point of pretending nothing was wrong for the sake of dealing with other issues. With Asch there was always something, someone else more important than his state of mind and he needed someone to look out for him. That was her job as his fiancée, was it not? Still, something within her stayed her hand inches away from knocking. Would he even want to see her? Building up all the courage she could muster, Natalia gently knocked on the large door. The seconds she waited passed like hours, the whole while her heart was beating fiercely in her chest. Why was she so nervous? She was just speaking with Asch, she'd done so all her life... and yet over the course of the past couple weeks he had become a stranger. She wasn't going to let him push her away. Maybe he didn't see it himself, but he needed someone else now more than ever.

"It's open." Asch's voice came through the door and Natalia hesitantly opened it. "Natalia," Asch turned to see who had entered before returning his attention to the small window.

"What are you doing in here all by yourself?"

"Looking for that fomicry facility," Asch answered.

"Why don't you join Jade, Noelle and I? We're all keeping an eye out up front."

"It doesn't hurt to have a different perspective. I'll stay here."

"Asch... Asch please. This has to stop." The redhead turned to face Natalia, the desperation in her voice drawing his attention. She stood before him, a hand closed and resting on her chest, her olive eyes shining with uncertainty, darting away from his searching gaze. Why was she...

"Natalia... what's the matter?" Asch asked, worry settling in him amongst the waves of regret and guilt that had been drowning him. He took one of her hands in his, and he felt her fight against the instinct to jerk away. Had it gone that far?

"I just came here to apologize," Natalia said, her eyes unable to face his.

"What are you apologizing for? You haven't done anything wrong."

"All that time in Baticul, the God-Generals were after you and I never did a thing."
"Of course not, that was what I wanted. I didn't want you to get involved. How could you have done something you knew nothing about?"

"But I did," Natalia leaned forward, placing her arms gently around him. "I knew you weren't being yourself. We both did, Luke and I both noticed that you were weary and becoming more distant. I'm so sorry; I was so quick to assume it had to do with you being busy that I never bothered to ask you why! I should have noticed you were so troubled, I should have been there for you."

"Don't apologize," Asch said silently. "I was the one who chose not to tell you, I didn't expect you to- I didn't want you to know. So don't say sorry, given the choice, I would do everything the same again."

"But why? Why do you have to shoulder everything on your own? Why can't you let us be a part of this?"

"There isn't any point in attracting trouble for more people than we have to. Besides, it's not like anyone actually needs me here."

"That's ridiculous!" Natalia protested, detaching herself from Asch.

"Is it?" The redhead challenged. "You functioned just fine while I was gone."

"Well... yes we did fine, but-"

"You were perfectly happy."

"Asch... you don't truly believe that?" She asked in disbelief. "There's no one other than you that can fill your place."

"So the court is trying to disinherit me because no one else can possibly take the throne?"

"But..."

"We both know the only reason I was chosen was because the Score said that I would lead Kimlasca to prosperity," Asch pointed out.

"You will!" Natalia protested. "We will, together! It will be the greatest years Kimlasca's ever known. I believe in those words you said to me all those years ago."

"You don't know that."

"I do! I do because- because I know you, and I love you. You and only you!"

"But even that is because we were told that we would marry someday. It has nothing to do with me. Had the Score said someone else was to be king, someone else was your fiancée... could you still say that?"

"Asch, stop it!" Natalia demanded, her voice almost breaking. "You... you can't do that. What if the real Princess Natalia wasn't stillborn? Could you say the same? You'd have loved her instead. What if neither of us were royalty? What if the world had ended? The Score came true and you died in Akzeriuth? Luke wasn't born? Anything? You could go on forever but none of it matters! There's only one reality, there's only what is... and there's only one of you."

"You say that and yet-!" Asch cut himself off, but he could see the pained curiosity in Natalia's eyes. She wanted to know what he had been about to say. But he refused to voice such feelings,
even to himself; feelings he had long since thought he'd left behind him. Who knew? Maybe that was the problem in and of itself. "I'm sorry," Asch finally said softly. "It wasn't fair of me to say those things."

"Asch, we all care about you. I need you here; no matter what anyone else thinks or says... I treasure your presence more than anything! I would be devastated if-" Natalia didn't even finish the thought. "I need you by my side..."

Asch smiled sadly. "I know," he whispered softly, kissing her on the forehead. "Thank you."

The metal door closed, leaving Natalia alone in the empty room, clouds flying by the window in which her gaze was lost. It seemed as if everything was fine... but she still couldn't shake the pit in the bottom of her stomach.

The ocean beneath the Albiore was choppy, tossed about by the winds and darkened by the clouds that Ginji was bordering trepidaciously. The headwinds weren't anything to laugh about, and after the incident in the Megiorra Highlands he was in no hurry to test them. At least it looked like they were working their way out of the impending storm, which was good in more ways than one; finding anything among stormy seas was going to be next to impossible.

"I hope the others are having better luck," Ginji commented.

"In weather and in finding this thing," Guy agreed. "Oh well, they have Asch and Jade with them. Between the two of them, they're obsessive enough that if this facility is anywhere west of Yulia City they'll find it." Luke chuckled from his seat on the other side of the Albiore.

"Can I ask you something?" Ginji inquired curiously. "Was Asch's group sent with Noelle because the two of us took off without you before?"

"I'm sure that fact was factored into Jade's decision," Guy replied.


"Don't worry about it, Ginji," Luke said with a smile. "You were just helping out a friend."

"It's a pity though, Noelle was a bit disappointed about the flying arrangements."

"Really? Why's that?" Guy asked curiously.

"Oh no particular reason," the pilot replied with a mischievous chuckle.

"You know, I just thought of something," Luke spoke up from his seat. "If this facility is moving underwater... we are never going to find it."

"Yeah, that could be a problem," the Malkuth noble agreed. "Then again I guess Teodoro's search team looked underwater for the other location and didn't find it so maybe they have some equipment we could borrow."

"This officially makes the list as the most inefficient thing we've ever done," Luke grumbled.

"Yes, yes it is," Guy chuckled.

"Are you laughing at me?" Luke eyed his best friend suspiciously.

"Not really, I'm just glad to hear you whining about something. You've had me worried lately. It's
"There's something I never thought I'd hear you say." Luke paused. "I was worried about you too. The way you were after we ran into those replicas... what happened?"

"Seeing them... seeing Mary's face, it made me remember. I remember the day that she died. We were hiding from the Kimlascan soldiers, and Mary put me in the fireplace. She told me not to move, that I had to live on to carry on our family's name. When the soldiers burst into the room, I was scared and tried to get to her. She shielded me with her body, and so did the other maids. I stayed buried under them until I fell unconscious and Pere found me. Now that I think about it, that's probably why I'm so afraid of woman..."

"Guy..." Luke opened his mouth but couldn't find the words to say. What could he say? He was... he was the son of the man who did that to him. The respect he had for his best friend and for the strength it must have taken him to chose the path that he did... there were no words for it. "I'm sorry," he finally managed.

"It's not your fault," Guy answered.

"But I still laughed at you, and made fun of your fear of women."

"Really, it's alright. It is pathetic. They all gave up their lives to save me, and not only did I forget them... I just find women scary. It's pitiful that I remember my sister that way. Now..." Guy sighed. "I know it's a replica, that she doesn't have my sister's memories or personality or anything. To her, I'm just a stranger... but the feelings are still there, you know?"

"Yeah. I hope if we meet them again we can find a way to talk things out. I don't want to have to kill them."

"I agree. But while we're on the topic of replicas, Luke, how long do you plan to keep this up with Asch?"

"What do you mean?" Luke asked, a nervous smile on his face.

"Luke stop that. No one is going to believe that you're fine with things as they are. I know Asch snuck off on his own and all that, but he did it to try and protect you. Don't you think it's time you cut him a break?"

Luke shook his head. "This has nothing to do with that. To be honest, when Asch first took off without us I was afraid; scared that Asch didn't want me around anymore, and that I meant nothing to him. Finding out he'd left to protect the Sword made me feel a lot better, even though I hated how he chose to do it, it still meant that he cared. If that was all it was, then it would be okay. I mean, in the end I did the exact same thing to Tear, right?"

"Then what's going on between you two?"

Luke pondered it a moment. "Guy... what are you most afraid of?"

"Well, if I had to pick, I'd say one of Anise's bear hugs."

The young noble attempted a smile, grateful for his best friend's attempt to lighten the mood. Guy frowned. All the expression did was contrast the dejection that had taken root. "You know what mine is?"

"Luke..."
"I'm terrified of people finding out that I'm a replica; I'm scared of how they'll treat me because I'm a replica. I don't want to be different than others; I don't want people to hate me because I'm different than them. I just want to be like anyone else... but people do, they would hate me if they knew and there isn't anything I can do about it. I can't change what I am! So to hear it... to hear it coming from him... Asch and I may have our ups and downs, but I respect him... I look up to him! How could he... how could he even think something like that?"

The roar of the Albiore's engines drowned the silence that loomed in the cockpit.

"I guess, in the end, why we're fighting doesn't really matter anymore," Luke said quietly. "After all, I'm just his replica."

Guy watched his best friend walk away, heading down the stairs that lead to the cabins. The blond sighed, giving into the fond smile that spread across his face.

"Luke... you really are an idiot."

"This is perfect," Mohs declared, walking down the marble path. The road he walked was still dimly lit, an eerie, almost ghostly place. Still it would not remain as such for much longer, and that time would be when things would truly begin to move. The world would see the power that the New Order of Lorelei had to offer and they would flock to him. Events had to be put back on the path of the Score regardless of the cost. It was his duty as a watcher. "The people are more than willing to heed my words!"

"People are fickle, that's hardly something to brag about."

"What are you doing here, Sync?" Mohs demanded. "Don't you have work to do?"

"I don't need you worrying about my job, just make sure you do yours," Sync shot.

"There's no need for any concern. With the return of the miasma, the faith of the people waivers and they are all but ripe for the picking," the self proclaimed, new Fon Master stated. "All I need is the final fonstone and the people will undoubtedly flock to the New Order. Even if the rulers are still hesitant, they will have no choice but to follow in our stead once we have the faith of their people. The power of the masses is not to be underestimated."

"The only use for pawns," the God-General sneered.

"I see you've been making progress," a second, deeper voice came from the shadows. "How far along are we?"

"Commandant," Sync stood up straighter than the casual slump he had been in before, though he still leant against the marble column. "Things have been progressing as planned."

"Van," Mohs interrupted, full of all the authority he believed he had. "Where is the Seventh Fonstone? I've been searching around here, but I've yet to locate it."

"Surely you don't think I'm foolish enough to keep it here?" Van inquired.

"Why not? The entire purpose of the New Order of Lorelei is to return the world to the path the Score had set out from the beginning! It is our job to describe the promised prosperity to the people!"

"Of course," the Commandant replied.
"Do you truly have the real Seventh Fonstone?"

"Yes, but the time to reveal it is not now. For the time being it is hidden and well guarded, it wouldn't be wise to play all our cards at once."

"No, but it will be needed soon enough," Mohs declared. "I'm going to return to Daath for the time being, there will undoubtedly be more people than ever demanding answers only we can provide them. If we can promise them the Seventh Fonstone's prosperity, that fool Ion's Order will dissolve completely."

"What an arrogant, pompous idiot," Sync spat as soon as Mohs was out an earshot.

"Yes, but as presumptuous as he may be, he still serves a purpose for the time being," Van commented. "He'll keep the world's eyes averted from our efforts for now."

"As long as he wants that Seventh Fonstone, he'll do whatever we want him to." A malicious grin spread across Sync's face. "But are you sure it'll be safe with her guarding it? She's been with the Sacred Flame's group, I hear. Her loyalties are questionable. There's no saying what she might do, or who she may tell."

"It's irrelevant, either way could play right into our hands," Van stated simply. "There are people, such as Mohs, who will believe anything so long as it agrees with their faith; others refuse to believe the truth until they've touched it with their bare hands."

"Like your sister," Sync suggested.

"C-Commandant!" A surprised voice appeared from the same shadows into which Mohs had disappeared earlier. "You've returned! When did you arrive? How have you been feeling?"

"I arrived yesterday, though I'm still a bit unstable; it could not be delayed any longer. What is our current status, Legretta?"

"Unfortunately, it seems as if the Sword of Lorelei has come into play. Our most recent information still puts it in the hands of the Sacred Flame," the blonde God-General reported. "Cantabile and I have been working on securing it, but haven't been able to thus far."

"And the Jewel?"

"We've been unable to locate it, even through the unconventional routes. At the very least it does not appear to be in the Asch's possession. His actions suggest that he has been searching for it as well."

"Good, keep it that way. Continue your search for the Jewel as well as the efforts to secure the Sword. We can't risk the two coming together."

"Understood," Legretta nodded. "Everything else is proceeding as planned. However, not long ago some fonists from Yulia City were poking around. It seems they've detected the fonon consumption and are trying to pinpoint the source. It will only be a matter of time before they find us."

"That will be of little concern soon enough," Van declared. "Soon the promised lands will rise, and once they do, Yulia herself will protect them."

"Yulia's own creation shields the instrument of her undoing," Sync said with a smirk.
"I thought you might enjoy that," Van replied, his own grin no less malicious. "But before that, you both have jobs to do."

"Yes, sir," Legretta said, standing to attention.

"Understood, Commandant," Sync replied.

"It's time that we got everything underway."
The Lost Isle

Clouds hung ominously in the sky, seemingly compressing the silence in which Tear and her friends were travelling. It was like a strange unspoken rule, no sooner were Asch and Luke in each other's company did an awkward silence fall over them. Things had been lively enough in the Albiore, so much so that the fact they had actually been able to find what they were searching for amidst their antics really surprised her. Now... every trace of that mirth was gone, and though the twins seemed to be perfectly content ignoring the existence of the other, they still dragged that reticence along as they continued to explore the mysterious moving facility.

It was an island. A moving island, which made it all the more peculiar and confirmed that there was a good chance this was where they'd find Mohs' fomicry facility. There was no way that such a thing was a natural phenomenon, and it had taken several minutes of both her and Luke astutely watching the small land mass drifting across the waves to confirm for themselves that it was, in fact, moving and thus probably the object of their search.

Ginji had quickly sent word along to Noelle, and with Jade in agreement that the island was particularly suspicious, it left the two pilots the task of trying to find a place to land among the massive amounts of debris. The whole place sent unwilling shivers up Tear's spine; it almost seemed haunted. Houses and buildings were all rundown, dead plants and leaves filled cracked planters that hung from broken windows. The wooden doors were rotten and covered in moss, making the search through the crumbled structures easier than they'd initially anticipated. Still... the weight of the miasma hanging in the air gave the entire island an eerie feel.

The toxic haze hung heavily on everyone, though it would take months to years before the miasma would start affecting people, the constant gloom and stifling feeling didn't take long to wear on anyone... but that wasn't the problem. More than anything, the miasma weighed on everyone's minds. Especially Asch and Natalia who were more involved in politics and could truly grasp the impact that this would have on the people of the world. If they didn't find a way to deal with this... then everything would eventually be no different than this island: dead, barren and completely devoid of life.

What had happened to the people who once lived here? For that matter, what kind of island floated aimlessly through the oceans? Something had to be pushing it along, right? It was probably just the currents, after all they were strong enough to move the giant ice masses that floated about the northern oceans, they could definitely move an island... of course they could. That had to be it. But... why was this island even floating in the first place? What had created such a phenomenon? She had read stories about such things before... no, that was just stupid! Tear cut herself off before she even let her mind go there. There was no way it was h-h-haunted. There was no logical reason to think so irrationally... soldiers who were frightened by such petty things were a disgrace. Besides...those kinds of things... ghosts and- and- they were completely impossible! They were the things in children's bedtime stories. Why would lingering spirits, full of anger and hate and regret want to come- to come after-

"Tear?"

The young melodist shrieked, jumping a foot in the air. It took a moment for Tear to contain herself, and once she did she noticed herself under the astute gaze of all her friends.

"Are you alright?" Luke asked confusedly, his hand still frozen in the air where her shoulder had once been. Tear went bright red.
"I-I'm perfectly fine!" She managed to stutter. "Th-there's no way I would think that this place is haunted or anything ridiculous like that!"

"Are... you afraid of ghosts?" Luke asked, doing his best to stifle the laughter that was quietly spreading through the others.

"Of course not!"

"I wouldn't be too ashamed Tear," Natalia confessed. "This place is quite eerie. I can't imagine what sort of nightmare-ish things must have occurred here to leave everything so desolate."

"It does look like whatever it was, it took everyone at once," Asch pointed out.

"Indeed, it did take everyone at once," Jade confirmed. "There were a great many deaths here in the past. I wouldn't be surprised if there were more than a few resentful feelings."

"Oh Tear," Anise said menacingly, running a finger up the melodist's spine and sending her leaping into Luke's arms with a second shriek.

"I'm- I'm not afraid of ghosts!" Tear protested.

"Of course not," Anise said, the mischievous look on her face never vanishing. "You just needed an excuse to get into Luke's arms, didn't you?"

Tear's face turned beat red and she forcefully removed herself from the young noble's grasp. Everyone burst out laughing, including the young Kimlascan monarch, who, despite still being on terrible terms with his younger brother, couldn't quite hold back the evil snicker that came with embarrassing his sibling and the object of said sibling's affections.

"You sound like you know what this place is Jade," Guy inquired once he'd gotten his laughter under control.

"I'm quite surprised you don't," Jade replied.

"I do..." Guy trailed off. He shook his head, dismissing the thought that lingered there. "But I can't quite place it."

"This island was once part of the Hod archipelago," Jade explained. "Though smaller, it had many business dealings with Hod."

"Feres Isle!" The blond jumped in with the jogging of his memory. "I remember now. I only came here a couple times as a kid with my dad and my sister. If I remember right, it was washed away by a tidal wave when Hod collapsed."

"So this is Feres Isle..." Asch looked around curiously. He'd read of it, but he didn't think there was anything left of the place after the tidal wave had struck. Well whether the land mass had lived or not, it didn't look like any of the people had, at least none that had bothered to stick around.

"Still," Anise started sceptically, "Even if it was hit by a tidal wave, there's no way it would start floating around the ocean, right?"

"No, this is very unlikely a natural occurrence. There's a good chance this is the source of the Seventh Fonon consumption."

"That's somewhat comforting, at least," Natalia conceded. "We know we aren't in the wrong place."
All things considered, it would make for a logical location to hide a fomicry facility. Even if the island were to be discovered, no one would bother looking around such a place."

"It's just searching the whole island that's going to be a pain," Asch commented. "I doubt they left it out in the open for us to find."

"No, the God-Generals probably have it hidden away somewhere," Tear agreed. "We have to find it and destroy it or else the imbalance of Seventh Fonons is only going to get worse."

"We cannot allow you to do that."

Luke and his friends all spun around at the all too familiar voice. It was the group of replicas that they'd encountered at Tataroo Valley! Of course... Luke shook his head, surprised he hadn't considered the possibility before now. It made sense that this would be their base if it was where Mohs was creating them. Luke carefully scanned the group. There were only about a dozen or so this time, and there were no trained soldiers with them. Other than Mary and a few others, they weren't very well equipped either. It looked like Mary's group hadn't intended to run into them... this was perfect; if Luke's group had the upper hand, there was a better chance they could just talk through this.

"I see you escaped," Mary commented.

"We have you to thank for being alive," Luke said gratefully. If he treaded carefully then maybe...

"Mohs was displeased with our actions before," Mary continued, speaking to her comrades without ever taking her eyes off the group before her. Whether by accident or by choice she remained oblivious to Luke's attempts at initiating a conversation. "This time we are to kill all of them except him." The replica's finger was pointed straight at Asch. "Mohs will use him to get what he needs. The others are of no use anymore."

"Mary, please," Guy spoke up. "Don't do this."

"Kill them."

The eleven replicas standing behind Mary all charged, and despite his best attempts, Luke was forced to draw his sword. Though they were outnumbered, with the lack of Oracle Knights and the fact that there were less of them, Luke found himself on equal footing with most of his opponents. Still, finding himself matching blows with lemon was hard to swallow. Luke could still feel that lingering hesitation, the resolve that hadn't solidified while there was still a chance that they could stop all this nonsense. Even if they weren't the people his friends once were, it didn't mean that they had to be his enemies.

They were not just replicas.

"Stop all this," Luke pleaded when he found himself going strike for strike against Mary. "Do you even know what it is you're fighting for?"

"We fight against you; you and all those who oppose the birth of our brethren. Why can you not accept us and our right to exist in this world as much as you?"

Luke was taken aback and the ensuing hit sent him scrambling backwards to regain his balance and put some needed space between them. The skill with which she fought was amazing, Luke remained in awe even as Mary closed the distance between them and their fight continued. He just didn't get it. There was no way the replicas could be that old... and he sure as hell couldn't even properly hold a sword until he was at least two. Luke would be the first to admit he wasn't the
strongest person in the world, but he knew more about swordsmanship than most people, and it was nothing for them to go toe to toe with him, not to mention all the others. How were their techniques so perfected?

"I don't!" Luke argued, breaking her defence and regaining the advantage. "I'm not opposed to the existence of replicas. But like anyone else, replicas should be born because there was someone out there who wanted them to be brought into this world, someone who wants to take care of them and love them, like any family should. Replicas should never be born to be used as tools, so I can't let this continue!"

"You say we are tools, that we are unwanted; but you are wrong. Mohs created us because he had need of us. We follow his orders for that reason. He has promised us all safety and a place to live on the heavenly plane, so we will do whatever is asked of us in return."

"But that's wrong! 'Because Mohs said so'... trust me, that isn't the road you want to go down. You can't just live based on how other people tell you. You have to think for yourself and make your own choices! You need to know what Mohs' plan means, not just for you but for everyone else! Don't you know? If you let Mohs succeed, then all the originals will die!"

"Why should we care what happens to the originals?" Mary asked.

"Because they live on this planet just like you do. Because to care about others is part of what it means to live! Besides, if it weren't for the originals, you never would have been born."

"So now we live," Mary replied, landing a hit that sent Luke staggering. The young noble managed to recover just in time to parry her ensuing attack. "Are we to remain beholden to the originals forever? There is no reason to care for those who won't accept us. The words of one such as you, one who has a place in this world, mean nothing. You could never begin to understand the challenges replicas like us face. So, we will leave you behind and build our own world."

"You can't-"

Movement from the corner of his eye, distracted Luke and he spun around to block the strike. Guy jumped in, occupying Mary's attention and leading her away from Luke's open back. The young noble didn't recognize his latest attacker, but he was almost as skilled as Mary had proven to be. Instinctively looking towards the sidelines, Luke panicked a brief second before realizing that Ion wasn't with them. Of course he wouldn't be hanging around the battlefield... he was in Daath getting better.

The knife Luke's latest opponent was wielding swiped a bit too close for comfort, bringing him back to the fight. Luke heard a yell; Anise had been knocked off of Tokunaga. He tried to hurry to her side but was cut off by Iemon's replica. Damn it! Luke put all his attention into blocking the strikes from both opponents. This was just ridiculous; there had to be some way to talk his out.

"Why are we fighting like this?" Luke tried to ask the replicas that were attacking him. "Why do you have to kill us to find a place you belong?" The two attackers didn't reply, simply continuing their assault.

The young noble remained on the defensive, determined to get an answer out of them. There just had to be a way! He couldn't let them walk down the same road he had! He couldn't!

Luke's eyes opened wide, a large shadow looming over him emphasized only by the clashing of metal on metal. Daring to look over his shoulder, he saw Asch holding the weight of a third replica's sword that had no doubt been ready to come down on him. In a single fluid motion Asch
pierced through the enemy's stomach, crippling them and leaving them for dead. The two attacking replicas backed off several paces.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Asch demanded. "You keep holding back like this and you're going to get yourself killed!" Luke refused to answer. "Well? Do you want to die?"

"What do you care?" Luke asked, his voice carrying a despondent tone. "After all, I'm just your replica."

In a burst of fury, Asch spun around and turned on his sibling, landing a punch clear across the face that sent Luke crashing to the ground. Luke just sat there, in pure shock at what had just happened. Asch's clenched fist was still trembling.

"Don't you ever... and I mean ever say something like that again! You are not just my replica, and if you even imply that I so much as think that, so help me Lorelei I'll pound those ridiculous delusions out of your head myself."

An awkward silence fell over the battlefield, not just between the boys, but everywhere. Natalia hesitantly lowered her bow, unsure what to make of it. All the replicas had stopped attacking, freezing like the rest of them at Asch's sudden outburst. All their attention was on the two redheads, but those two were oblivious to any of it.

"Oh really?" Luke protested, his flaming green eyes meeting his counterpart's. "That's not what you said before!"

"You stupid moron! Did you honestly think that's what I meant? I said that they were just replicas, because they are replicas, not the people our friends once were! Their lives are no different than those of any other person that Van or Mohs may send after us; but for some reason you can't see that! You're the one treating them different because they're replicas!"

"I am not!"

"Yes you are! If it had been anyone else, the God-Generals, you name it; you would have been willing to fight. Instead you were ready to just sit there and- and die! After everything..." Asch let himself trail off, unable to say it out loud.

After everything I did to protect you...

"Of all people..." Asch began again, his voice calmer this time. "How could you honestly believe that's how I felt?"

"Because it's how you've been acting for two months now," Luke shot coldly. His eyes glistened in the faint glow of the sun that had peeked out from its cover and fought through the miasma, only adding depth to the angry expression that surrounded them.

At those words, in all their pitiless verity, Asch's heart sank, and the last of his temper was drowned out by the feeling of his stomach as it tried to crawl back out his throat. The look in Luke's eyes spoke volumes, and it was an all too familiar emotion. How could he have been so oblivious? The anger, the bitterness, and the hurt that he couldn't even begin to explain... it was all there, and seven years didn't have near the power to bury the memories of those feelings. He knew those eyes... only for the first time, it wasn't a mirror he was looking into.

Was that really what he'd done to Luke? The emotions he'd cursed and that he struggled with even now, had his actions created those feelings in turn? He couldn't deny it; he wanted to, more than anything he didn't want to believe it. But he couldn't; not when it stared him down, all that anger
and resentment encapsulated in emerald spheres fighting against all duress to keep the content they shielded hidden. Still it was useless. Knowing what to look for peeled away the layers of stubborn pride, and what Asch had so carelessly ignored for all this time he now could see clear as day. In Luke's eyes, he had been rejected... betrayed by his own brother, his own family, and more than anything else, he lashed out in fear. He was afraid of being alone.

Asch extended his hand, his frown deepening when Luke jerked away. "I'm sorry," Asch offered. It didn't, no it shouldn't have to be this way between them. There had been so many reasons, so many excuses that Asch had created, all giving him reasons to push Luke away... all while a part of him screamed inside. It was to protect him; it was for Luke's own good... to hell with that. Months of excuses were washed away by a single moment. He couldn't believe it had taken so long for such an obvious thing to register, and Luke's aversion to such a simple gesture was a harsh reminder that there was more than one way for someone to get hurt... and it was still all his fault.

All he'd unknowingly done... and 'sorry' was the only thing he could offer. He really was pathetic.

"You can forgive me, you can choose not to; that decision is yours. Either way, you've got to stop what you're doing. Just like you have a choice, so do all of them," Asch said with a nod towards their opponents, all still frozen where they'd stopped their assault before. "You can't force them down the road you think is right; that's no different than what Van is doing. I know you want to avoid fighting, but they have the right to choose to fight for what they believe in, and you have to respect that. Because they're people in this world too, right?"

Luke hesitated for a moment, but accepted Asch's hand and let his sibling pull him to his feet. They stood frozen in time, their entire world encompassed in their respective reflections before them. Luke smiled softly.

"I know, thank you."

'I'm sorry too,' Luke added sadly.

'Thank you.'

'Just promise me something.'

'What is it?' Asch asked curiously.

'From now on... if there's something you don't want to tell me, then say that. Tell me it's none of my business, hell you can tell me to piss off if you want to, whatever... just... no more lies, okay?'

Asch smiled. 'I think I can do that...as long as you can do the same.'

'Thank you...'

'We still need to talk later.'

'Yeah, I know.'

With a confidence that had long been missing from the young noble, Luke turned around and faced his opponents, taking an offensive stance.

"Asch is right," he said, looking Mary straight in the eye. "I can't force you to change the path that you're on, but I can't change my own path either. So if you're going to stand against us, then I don't have a choice but to fight you."
"You're one of us," Mary said, a hint of confusion offsetting her normally emotionless tone.

"What?" Luke returned the confusion.

"You're a replica," she stated plainly.

"That's right. I'm Asch's replica, I was born seven years ago. What of it?"

"Then you are one of our kindred." The replica's leader stared Luke down, an unusual expression spreading across her face. Luke readied himself, unsure what she was debating and exactly where she was going with her newfound realization. "Lower your weapons," Mary finally said, and the others all immediately backed off. "I will not allow the death of any more of our brethren."

"What's the meaning of this?" Asch asked.

"We were betrayed." Mary mumbled to herself. "No, that cannot be correct. There must be a mistake of some sort."

"Betrayed? Who betrayed-"

Luke's inquiry was cut off by the sudden violent rattle of the earth beneath his feat. The youngest sibling nearly crashed into the ground, saved by Asch's grasp at the last second, the latter barely managing to keep them both on their feet. Brittle walls of surrounding buildings collapsed, roaring and sending clouds of dust and dirt flying into the already suffocating air. Both the replicas and Luke's friends were sent into fits of coughing, and only the familiar sounds told the redhead that all his companions were accounted for and still safe.

A second wave of tremors rippled through the island, but the destruction of the fragile isle was drowned out by the crashing of water. Waves taller than the crippled houses crashed against the shores, throwing debris around as if it were a plaything. Only the fact that they were away from the island's edge saved their lives.

"Is everyone alright?" Tear called out. The silence following the tremor was broken only by the dust settling and the occasional sound of a building collapsing in the distance.

"We're fine," Asch answered, helping Luke up.

"Us too," Anise called, she, Guy, Jade and Natalia coming through the dust cloud.

"How about you?" Guy asked. Mary looked up confusedly when Luke offered her a hand.

"We're fine as well," Mary replied. "I don't know about the others."

"What was that about?" Luke inquired.

"I'm not certain," Jade admitted. "It was too violent to be an earthquake out at sea like this. Especially since it's unlikely the isle is actually in contact with the ocean floors."

"Uh guys," Anise began. "What's that?"

The former Fon Master Guardian pointed to the sky in the distance. Sitting on the horizon, for the world to see was what looked like an island. The massive land mass created a black outline in the sky, spires breaking the otherwise smooth shape and giving it a more ominous presence.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Anise exclaimed. "First islands floating around the ocean, but islands floating in the sky now?"
"Mohs has gone ahead without us..." Iemon mumbled.

"That thing is Mohs' doing?" Natalia inquired.

"Mohs... you promised us a place on the new Hod," Mary said, staring at land in the sky.

"Hod?" Guy managed. "That's supposed to be Hod?"

"What will we do?" Iemon asked.

"Let us go to the place of the covenant," Mary answered. "Surely Mohs will come for us."

"But the navigational equipment was most likely destroyed with that last earthquake."

"If we follow the current, we should eventually wash ashore, we'll walk to the Tower of Rem from there."

"Understood."

"Gather the others," Mary commanded. "We must spread the word." She turned to leave, but took one last look over her shoulder. Her eyes met Luke's.

"Mary, wait!" Guy called, but the blonde replica vanished into the cloud of settling dust.

"What's going to happen to them now?" Luke wondered.

"They'll probably be abandoned," Asch replied solemnly. "As long as Mohs has the replica data, he can make as many as he wants. I doubt he's really going to take them in."

"That's so cruel..." Natalia commented, her eyes still in the direction their opponents had vanished.

"I do wonder why they were so willing to stop attacking us though," Tear pondered. "They seemed quite intent on killing us from the start."

"Isn't it because Luke is a replica like they are?" Anise asked. "No offense or anything Luke."

"None taken."

"It could be," Natalia agreed. "They did stop attacking as soon as Luke said he was a replica. If nothing else, they do seem rather protective of their own."

"They have to be," Luke spoke up. "I was lucky. They don't have anyone else to look out for them. Still... the way they think isn't good either."

"Why do you say that?" Anise asked curiously.

"Well, thinking like that just widens the gap between replicas and originals that much more. We're not any different than anyone else."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," she conceded.

"A replica Hod..." Guy mumbled, still looking at the floating island on the horizon. "Something tells me that isn't all Mohs' doing."

"If it's his at all," Jade agreed. "There is more than a good chance that the God-Generals are involved."
"Replicating Hod was part of Van's original plans. Things are starting to move," Asch commented.
"Yeah," Luke agreed. "So we'd better get moving too."

With the massive tremors that had shaken the island, the search for Mohs' fomicry facility became both simpler and at the same time, all the more treacherous. Even Tear was wary about the stability of the remaining structures; yet at the same time, those same structural considerations narrowed the scope of their search. The amount of equipment required for an operation on the scale Mohs was working was significant enough that many places just wouldn't be able to support it in their weakened state, eliminating the need to search many of the structures that remained standing.

Most of the dust had settled, but that wasn't the only thing that was calming down. No one was entirely sure exactly what had occurred between Luke and Asch through the course of that last battle; one of the things that made their connection so frustrating for the rest of them. It was impossible to tell exactly what was going on with them at any given time. Still... a warm feeling rose within Tear; Luke looked calmer and more relaxed than she'd seen him since they'd reunited. Something about him had been off in the past couple weeks, nothing she could specifically identify, but it was still there at the back of her mind, bothering her in those quiet moments that they shared together. Now, even just by looking at him, he seemed so much more like himself.

Tear suppressed a chuckle, content just watching Luke's shifting expressions. It was such a peculiar thing to watch, even knowing the reason behind it. She was glad that he and Asch were speaking again, and though Luke's expressions suggested it wasn't all pleasant conversation, she sincerely hoped that they'd be able to properly work through things now that they weren't in the heat of battle.

Though much of the tension between them had lifted, Tear and her companions still travelled in silence. The fact that the replicas had left so suddenly and without any way of knowing how quickly Mary's order to stand down had passed between them, kept everyone on their toes. None of them had shown up, but there was always the chance that they were still around. It would be foolish to let her guard down.

Jade was right, with what was looked to be a resurrection of Hod floating in the sky, there was a good chance this involved her brother and the God-Generals in one way or another. Mohs was probably just a figurehead they were using; an efficient one at that. The God-Generals knew it would be impossible for them to ignore Mohs' objectives and he had served his function as a diversion perfectly. Now who could say just how far along they'd come with their plans in these few months?

"There's something up ahead." Luke stopped, extending his arm before her and pulling Tear from her thoughts.

Luke drew his sword and was followed by the others. A growl drifted on the wind, followed by a massive yawn. A giant, yellow liger wandered around from behind a massive boulder, freezing at the sight of the humans it hadn't expected to find. The creature poised itself, ready to pounce but at the same time making no motion to do so. Restraint in a wild monster? No. The pattern of the black fur along its back and the flowing white mane were very familiar.


"That's one of Gloomietta's pets!" Anise exclaimed, maintaining her defensive stance.

"What are you doing here, Anise?" The creature's master rounded the corner, standing next to her
"I'm the one who should be asking you that! Why are you here?"

"This is my home!" Arietta yelled back. "I'm here protecting something very important, go away!"

"Arietta, why are you here?" Luke asked. "Why aren't you in Daath taking care of Ion? Isn't that what you wanted to do?"

"Yeah," Anise added snidely. "I thought you cared about Ion."

"Shut up! I do so care about Ion! I wanted to stay with him and take care of him... but Van says I can't! Van says Ion is useless because he's sick, and that I have to do this instead!"

"We're just looking for something Mohs might have left here," Asch explained. If nothing else, the young God-General had expressed a strong dislike of the pompous bastard. Maybe they could use that and to reason with her and get by without a fight. "We don't have any business with you; we just need to get by."


"I'm sorry, I really am. But I can't let you get by! Just go away!"

"Don't bother Luke," Anise intervened. "Arietta is too stupid to think for herself. She only ever obeys orders."

"I do not! You don't know anything, Anise! You're the one who only ever followed Mohs' orders to hurt Ion! It's your fault things turned out like this! It's your fault Ion got taken away from me! It's all your fault!"

Arietta's reply echoed through her liger and several other monsters quickly appeared from among the ruined structures. The massive creature pounced on Anise who only barely got away from the razor sharp claws that passed at her throat. Though she'd spared her neck, the liger caught Tokunaga's arm in its mouth and with a single violent motion, threw the girl from her doll, sending her crashing into Natalia.

Seeing the unguarded duo, a pair of griffons swept down from the sky more than eager to get a chance at the easy prey. Natalia reached about her, frantically searching for her bow. No, it was beyond her reach! The recovering Anise still pinned her down; she wouldn't get there in time! The shadows swept down on them; both girls cringed.

Torrents of water appeared above the creatures, their wings crippling as the weight of Jade's arte shattered the bones supporting them. Both fell to the earth like swatted flies.

"Are you two alright?" Guy moved in, delivering the fatal strike to both griffons, and taking a defensive stance before the two girls.

"We're fine, thank you," Natalia replied, helping Anise up.

"Tokunaga is not a chew toy you oversized mutt!" Anise yelled at the liger who still held her weapon of choice in its mouth. A well placed arte by the former Fon Master Guardian struck the liger, knocking it over and releasing its hostage. "Ugh, your liger drooled all over it!"

"Shut up, Anise! I'm going to make you pay for letting Ion get so sick!"
Even with several of her monster friends defeated, Arietta wasn't one to be underestimated and it was a fact that she seemed more than content to make obvious. Jade kept an eye on the pink haired girl, but maintained the majority of his focus on taking out Arietta's monsters, as well as the other wild monsters that had been lured in by the commotion, or perhaps even rallied by the God-General's forces. Regardless, it would be foolish to let those numbers go unchecked and far too easy to become overwhelmed, even by the easiest of foes.

To his left, Asch had the same idea and was providing the Necromancer with support, showing off his own array of fonic artes. Not quite as extensive as the Colonel's, but still rather impressive. He certainly maintained a wider inventory than his sibling, though the latter just may have developed the upper hand in swordsmanship from their discordant training tendencies over the past few months.

It was the latter, however, that Jade was more concerned about, and his increasing reluctance to fight many of their enemies was beginning to become troublesome. Luke's abilities to foster a feeling of amiability with someone were impressive, but doing so with the enemy was a poor choice, even if he had spent a considerable amount of time with the girl while tending to Ion that day in Daath. He could make friends all he wanted, but he had to realize that doing so meant he would have to fight those same friends.

Perhaps he knew this, or perhaps it was that Luke knew he was under Jade's scrutiny, but whatever the reason, he too was preferentially engaging the monsters leaving the God-General herself in the hands of Anise, Guy and the Kimlascan princess. With Tear's artes added to the mix, the number of monsters was dwindling quickly, and Luke's avoidance of the issue at hand could only go on for so much longer. What would he do then, Jade wondered.

"Arietta, stop, you're not going to win," Luke joined in beside Anise when one of the God-General's artes put Guy, and consequently Natalia, temporarily out of commission. "Don't make us kill all your friends."

"No! I can't! Van told me I had to guard this, no matter what!"

"Who's more important to you, Master Van or Ion?"

Arietta opened her mouth to protest, but was silenced when the question reached her ears. "I-Ion is," she finally managed, "but the Commandant told me I have to do this for Ion! Ion told me to always help the Commandant, no matter what!"

"Forget what they all said!" Luke swung at the God-General, forcing her to halt her arte and evade his attack. A remaining liger pounced to defend its master but Luke ducked around it. "What is it that you want to do?"

"I... I want to help Ion but-"

"Then that's all you need. Go back to Daath and take care of Ion."

"Luke!" Anise yelled in protest, still in the process of trying to deal with liger he'd oh so conveniently left to her after dodging its initial assault. Honestly! What the hell was he thinking? Trying to convince the enemy to go sit by Ion's bedside? Who knows what she might do!

"But if I do that, then the Commandant and- and Ion will both be mad at me for not listening to them!"

"Then let them be mad! At least you know you did what you thought was right. You can't let
Master Van or even Ion tell you how to live your life, or make your choices for you. You have to decide on your own. Besides...didn't you say you would protect Ion, no matter what?"

"I..."


"Everyone!" Arietta called out and the remaining few monsters immediately ceased their assault. The pink haired God-General climbed on the back of a liger; then with a final doubtful look back and a reassuring nod from Luke, she took off into the distance.

"You got her to leave." Guy sheathed his sword, the tone in his voice more than impressed.

"Yes, but that may have been cruel in its own way," Natalia commented.

"It's not her Ion," Luke agreed sadly. A part of him was screaming, hating himself for just being one more person to manipulate her feelings.

'You got her to make a choice for herself,' Asch said softly, picking up on those feeling of guilt. 'It's a start.'

'Maybe.'

"It may not be the Ion she fell in love with," Luke continued, "but I don't think that means that she can't form a bond with this one too."

"It doesn't matter," Anise grumbled. "I still don't trust her."

"More concerning than her potential allegiances, are her comments regarding the Commandant," Jade pointed out.

"Indeed," Natalia agreed. "She spoke as if she'd met with him since our last encounter. That would mean... he's no longer in the core."

"He probably isn't," Asch spoke up. "Otherwise there's no way he could have known that Ion is sick."

"Which also means he's likely trapped Lorelei," Jade pondered. "This is bad. The Planet Storm is only going to get worse and bring more miasma with it."

"This is starting to get complicated," Guy sighed. "Let's deal with one thing at a time, first we have a fomicry facility to shut down, then we can worry about what to do with the Planet Storm and Van."

"I'm still kind of curious though, what does Master Van have Arietta guarding, here of all places?" Luke asked.

"It could very well be the fomicry facility," Jade replied. "If it can produce replicas on the scale that we've seen so far, it would a valuable asset to him."


"What's that?"

"Well, they can't have been around for all that long, right? How come they seem to know so much and are so well trained?"
"A little jealous, perhaps?" Jade commented slyly.


"Well since it took you two years to learn to walk and talk properly, I guess I can see how that would bug you," Asch joined in. "As for fighting, well we still haven't determined how long you're going to take to get somewhat decent."

"Hey! I could beat you one on one," the younger sibling challenged.

"I'll spare you the humiliating defeat," Asch teased.

"Luke's own progression aside, I admit I'm rather curious as well," Natalia admitted as everyone continued along, Luke and Asch still taking playful jabs at each other. It was astounding just how different their demeanour was than just a few hours ago. How they could reverse their behaviour so drastically, was beyond her.

"It's related to fomicry experiments that were done in conjunction with the military some time ago," Jade explained. "Replicas can be programmed to perform certain functions at the time of their creation."

"Well then, why are all replicas not programmed with the ability to walk and talk when they are born? It would make a great deal more sense."

"Unfortunately, doing so interferes with normal learning and development process. They have an innate knowledge of programmed tasks, but their personality and other such traits do not properly develop."

"That's terrible."

"You can see it in the replicas too," Tear commented. "Their eyes seem so empty, and they don't get worked up or angry or anything either."

"I'm certainly glad that's not what became of Luke," Natalia said.

"Me too," Tear agreed, a fond smile on her face, watching the young replica who had already walked ahead of them.

"Guys!" Luke's voice interrupted their conversation and looking up, he was waving at them in the distance. "I think we found something!"

Something they'd found indeed; Jade adjusted his glasses. The machine was easily twice the size of the one in Choral Castle and undoubtedly had ten times the operating capacity. The building that housed the fomicry machine seemed to be quite stable despite a large portion of the back wall that was missing. Unfortunately the facility seemed to still be perfectly operational, but who could have built something of this magnitude? Van had only recently returned, and Mohs was nowhere near this capable. No, this was almost undoubtedly Dist's work. Well, that should make it relatively easy to disassemble.

"I think we found that proof," Anise commented sarcastically, kicking one of the many helmets that were strewn about the floor. The entire room was littered with armour and a variety of military equipment, both from Kimlasca and from Malkuth. "I don't think we can take the fon machine, but how much of this junk do you want?"

"Wow," Guy looked up in awe. "I can't imagine how many replicas something like this could..."
"Many more then we need running around trying to start a war, let's put it that way," Asch tossed in.

"Indeed," Jade agreed. The Colonel activated the control panel and began browsing through the different screens.

"Anything useful?" the Malkuth noble inquired.

"No," Jade continued to browse. "It doesn't look like it can be permanently disabled through here either."

"What does that mean?" Natalia asked.

"Asch, would you like to do the honours?" Jade asked tauntingly with a wave of his hand.

Asch cocked an eyebrow. "You say that like I enjoy destroying things."

"Don't you?"

Asch's mouth opened but before any sort of witty reply could come flying out of it, his expression shifted to a more curious one and he closed it.

"Where is Luke?" Guy started to look around, guessing what had stopped Asch in his tracks.

"He says he found something," Asch provided, pointing at the collapsed portion of the back wall. "He wants you to take a look at it Tear."

"Me?" Tear asked confusedly. Asch just shrugged in response; he didn't have any more answers than she did.

"Seeing as destroying the facility would make it difficult for our little replica to escape from back there, perhaps we ought to indulge him before proceeding," Jade suggested.

"You first old man," Asch taunted with a taunting wave of his hand.

"Tsk, tsk, such disrespect for your elders."

"I learn from the very best," he shot, following the others outside.

"Luke," Tear called, stepping over the rubble to get outside. "Luke!" Where did he get off to now? Didn't he realize this wasn't the time to be exploring? Besides, what could he have possible found, and why did he want her to take a look at it?


"Luke, what's going on?" Tear chided. "You shouldn't be wandering around on your own, especially when we're dealing with such important matters."

"She's right," Asch agreed. "With the God-Generals out there doing who knows what, you need to be more careful. What is it you need Tear for?"

"I want her to check if it's real."
"Check if what's real?" Asch asked, doing his utmost to keep his frustration in check.

Luke grabbed Tear's arm and pulled her with him over the ridge of debris. Below them the ground dropped steeply, several underground facilities having collapsed, making the path treacherous. Tear's eyes widened in shock. Sitting below them was a massive fonstone.

"That," Luke answered simply. "You can tell if it's real, right Tear?" Luke didn't get an answer, but they began their climb down the steep incline none-the-less.

"It couldn't be," Tear mumbled in disbelief, allowing Asch to give her a hand down before approaching the mysterious stone. It was almost as tall as she was and was just a bit wider than it was tall. The smooth polished surface had lettering engraved in it, behind which she could see her reflection. Even without the full light of the sun, it sparkled in a rainbow of colours. Could it really be...? She placed both her hands up against it and closed her eyes.

"The Seventh Fonstone?" Guy asked.

"It is," Tear replied after a moment. "It's a piece of the Seventh Fonstone, but how did you know that?"

"I saw it in the core," Guy replied. "Van must have brought it back out with him when he came back."

"But what purpose would Van have for the Seventh Fonstone? If I recall correctly, he already knows its contents."

"Van himself may not need it, but I bet it would make for great bait for Mohs," Asch realized. "Could you imagine what would happen if Mohs got this and could tell the world his New Order has the Seventh Fonstone?"

"It would be chaos," Natalia agreed. "Everyone would want to know the Score, and if the world leaders refuse to follow, who knows what could occur."

"Well we can't let Mohs have it, that's for sure," Guy spoke up. "But what are we going to do about it?"

"Could we take it with us?" Anise asked.

"I doubt this would fit in the Albiore," Natalia replied, her eyes darting across trying to do a quick estimate of its dimensions. "Travelling with it just isn't a possibility."

"Well we could probably get the Albiore to carry it if we had to, but carrying it around definitely won't work. Still, that's not really the problem," Guy postulated. "It's a really sticky situation. Things might be cool between the countries now, but with the history behind this thing, they won't stay that way long if we give the Seventh Fonstone to one side or the other."

"Could we move it, and then let them decide what to do about it at the summit?" Luke suggested.

"But where could we move it to?" Guy asked. "The neutral territory is the first place the God-General will look once they discover it's missing, and with Arietta's defection, I doubt it will be long before they come looking."

"Why not try Choral Castle?" the younger noble tossed out. "With Hod floating in the sky, I doubt the God-Generals are still using it as a base. No one goes there anymore so there isn't any chance of someone accidently stumbling onto it either."
"But there is still a fomicry facility there," Jade pointed out. "Once we've destroyed this one, there is a chance they may try to make use of it. Choral Castle may not be safe."

"I know where in Choral Castle we can stash it," Asch said. "It's a spot that the Albiore can reach and the God-Generals won't find it, at least until we've had enough time to decide what to do with it."

"We'll see once you've shown me where this place is," Jade conceded.

"We should hurry and go get Ginji and Noelle," Luke spoke up.

"Yeah, the sooner we can get this thing out of here, the better. It's just a mess waiting to happen."

"But before we leave, Asch still has a fomicry machine to destroy," Jade said slyly.

"Ha ha, funny, old man," Asch shot, withholding none of the exemplary sarcasm of which he was capable. "Do it yourself."

"Oh, but after all that fighting today, all my bones ache. It happens when you reach my age, you know?"

"Not happening."

"Well someone has to do it," Guy rolled his eyes. "Hey... why are the two of you looking at me that way? I don't do the whole fonic arte thing..."

"There's more than one way to skin a rappig," Asch said with a smirk.

'Peony would murder you for saying that,' Luke shot sceptically.

"Look I don't care who blows up the copy machine in there but someone do it so we can get out of here!" Anise yelled in frustration. "No offense Luke," she added as an aside.

"None taken."

"She is right though," Natalia said with a chuckle. If nothing else, she was just happy to see everything back to normal... if their antics could ever be considered normal. None-the-less, her friends were all smiling and in spite of the grim events that the future may hold, Natalia would never want it any other way.

"Let's get this done, gather some evidence and arrange for the summit," she said. "We've got a good deal of work ahead of us."
Politics

A soft morning breeze travelled down and around, tossing the uncut grasses from side to side. Wildflowers were slowly blooming, awakening to the everlasting spring that their home above the clouds afforded them. The same cool wind tossed Cantabile's bangs around her face, annoying the violet eye that wasn't hidden behind her leather eye patch. This fact, however, was far from being the source of the God-General's irritation.

"She gave it back?"

"According to intelligence," Legretta confirmed. "Arietta arranged for them to escape in exchange for the Fon Master. She returned all their equipment; including giving Asch the Sword of Lorelei back."

"That girl... it would have been right before I delivered her orders too! If I had known when I saw her, I swear..."

"It won't do any good to dwell on it. Arietta has further since abandoned her post guarding the Seventh Fonstone and now it's missing. She's likely somewhere back in Daath by this point."

"So what's Van going to do with her?" Cantabile asked.

"For now, he's instructed us to leave her be."

"Even though she's lost the Seventh Fonstone? That seems suspicious."

"The only purpose for that fonstone is to serve as bait for Mohs. So long as he doesn't know we don't have it, it still serves its purpose. We've no need for such a thing."

"True, but still... to just let her run wild?" The younger God-General raised an eyebrow. "That's not like him at all."

"As long as she doesn't get in our way," Legretta stated. "As it stands now, she has no reason to fight so she's useless. She'll return to us when she learns the truth about the Fon Master. She'll see that she too has been a victim of the Score, whether she realized it or not."

"I still don't like the idea of leaving her alone," Cantabile muttered, her eye darted across the ground while her mind fluttered through an assortment of ideas. So many were beyond the realm of possibility, but a few could work. A sly grin worked its way across her face. "I'm all for speeding up that process a little," she finally stated, an especially evil gleam in her eye.

"If you want to stick your nose in, feel free; but it will have to wait until we've completed our own mission first," Legretta reminded her.

"Yeah, yeah. Don't you worry; those two Fabre brats are as good as mine."

The hum of the Albiore's engines faded into the background, dismissed on the basis of their familiarity to the melodist who walked back towards the small cabins. It was nice to have everyone together again; they hadn't all been on the same Albiore since leaving the Absorption Gate which seemed like a lifetime ago. Perhaps it was a bit cramped to have eight people and a cheagle in a single fon machine, but they wouldn't have it any other way.
Tear did feel for Noelle though, the poor girl was flying all by herself. After losing a game of rock-paper-scissors with Ginji, they'd managed to load the Seventh Fonstone onto her Albiore for transport to Choral Castle. In the end, even Jade had been impressed with the location Asch had described to them. It was in a secluded courtyard in the center of the abandoned manor. The basement or tunnels that passed below it had caved in, creating a convenient little nest in which they could set the fonstone. Anyone casually walking by wouldn't be able to see it since it was just below the ground and the towers made it very difficult to spot from the air. Of course, that made it unbelievably difficult to get in place, but the location was well worth the day they had spent orchestrating it. With some conveniently placed debris, it didn't look like there was anything there at all; much less the item countries had fought over for more than a millennia.

They had secured part of the Seventh Fonstone, a means to read the last of the Score Yulia had unveiled over 2000 years ago. It was tempting to read what was on it, to know what words had driven her brother to such drastically desperate measures. They had talked about it for a long time, but in the end, they'd made the decision against it. That was the thing about the last of anything; it meant there had to be an end. Knowing what it was wouldn't make a difference. It was only one of many paths and no matter where it led; it was for the world to decide in which direction they would take their future.

As for the direction of her future, it had taken her to the door to Luke and Asch's room. Though the older of the two was sitting up front with Anise and Guy, to the best of anyone's knowledge, Luke was still back here, the reason for which Tear wanted to know. She raised her hand and gently knocked, the hollow metal making an empty echo at each impact.

"It's open," the voice came from inside.

Tear opened the door and saw Luke sitting on the bed, his gaze turning to see who had entered before returning to the window behind which the clouds were racing by.

"What are you doing in here all by yourself?" Tear asked, sitting down on the bed beside him.

"Not much, just thinking I guess."

"What are you thinking about?"

"A little bit of everything. It's still another day before we get to Baticul; I'm just killing time." The young noble shrugged. "So," Luke turned to face her. "What's up?"

"Nothing in particular," Tear replied. "I was just worried about you; I wanted to see how you were doing."

"I'm fine, really," Luke answered with a smile.

"How are things with you and Asch?"

"We'll be alright," the young noble said. "We had a good long talk about everything last night, so at least for now we've got stuff sorted out."

"Can I..." Tear hesitated a moment. "Can I ask you about Asch?"

"Huh?" Luke was caught completely off guard by the question. "Well- I mean... sure, but... why the sudden interest?"

"Well with everything that's happened lately, I realized just how little I actually know about him. He's always so quiet and never really talks about himself. The things he likes to eat, his favourite
colour, his interests, I don't know anything... Even though we've travelled together all this time, I
don't feel like I know him at all, at least, not the same way I know you or Natalia, or any of the
others."

"Asch has always been that way," Luke answered, disguising a soft chuckle, "For as long as I can
remember. He's the kind of person who has a hard time making friends, because he can't bring
himself to open up to others. Unless someone is forced to be with him for any given amount of
time, they tend to shy away or avoid him before ever really getting to know him."

"Because he's the heir to the throne?"

"Well I'm sure it doesn't help, that's for sure," Luke replied with a sad smile. "I think the real
problem though, is that a part of him is afraid of being hurt and afraid of being judged... so he
closes himself off. I think he finds it safer that way. It's easier not to get hurt and to simply avoid
dealing with others. That's why always comes off as being so cold and no one ever really wants to
associate with him. No one ever wants to be his friend. Add to that the fact that he's been confined
to the manor for the most part, I guess it's not that surprising he isn't so great at dealing with
people. Deep down, he does want to be friends with everyone... he just doesn't know how to say it,
because he doesn't really know how to open up to or to trust others."

"I think you're wrong," Tear offered gently. What Luke said made sense, and really, he knew Asch
better than anyone, right? Still, Tear couldn't shake that look in his eyes, his demeanour when they
had been locked in that cell together. Nothing there had forced him to talk to her, or to share the
things that he had. There was a part of him that wasn't like that at all. "He does open up, and he
does trust others. I think that maybe even he doesn't realize it, but something brought him back to
us, right?"

Luke smiled. "Maybe..."

"Do you think he resents being forced to take the throne?"

"No," Luke answered with a gentle shake of his head. "I think if he were given a hundred choices,
that would still be the one he'd pick. It's probably the fact that the choice was taken away that bugs
him more than anything."

"I don't think that the choice was taken from him. All these years, he could have always chosen to
leave or to abandon that path, but he never did. That is a choice in and of itself."

Luke chuckled. "Try suggesting that to Father, I don't think it was much of a choice."

"Maybe not," Tear agreed with a smile. While they may have only met a couple times, Duke Fabre
was certainly a man she'd think twice before crossing.

Silence fell between the two teenagers and Tear began to see why Luke had been sitting here alone.
The gentle hum of the engines that she'd ignored now seemed so comforting. The soft rumble
entranced her thoughts, reducing them to nothing and allowing her to calmly drift along. Tear
leaned over, her head coming to rest on Luke's shoulder as her eyes wandered about the empty
room.

"Is that the Sword of Lorelei?" The melodist asked when her gaze fell upon the two weapons
sitting in the corner.

"Yeah," Luke answered, standing up from his bed and forcing Tear to shuffle a bit. He stood there
for a moment, staring at the blade as if lost in the mix of red and silver reflections that danced in its
depths. Carefully running his hand down the black handle, he watched intently as if hoping to see something, but whatever he sought, Luke didn't find. The Sword lay dormant, protecting all its secrets as it lay gently against Luke's own weapon. His hand closed around the handle and he lifted the Sword from its corner.

"Asch said it's supposed to glow when the Jewel is nearby," Luke explained. "It's sort of like a Jewel detector, but so far we've got nothing." Luke's grip on the Sword tightened. What he wouldn't give to see the Sword glow... he didn't care where or what he'd have to do. They needed that jewel!

"Well maybe with all the flying we're doing, it'll glow when we pass over it," Tear suggested.


Tear watched on curiously, observing the young noble weighing the Sword in his hand. The look on his face was somewhat fond, and very carefully, he swung the blade a few times, flipping it around in his grasp.

"You know," he eventually spoke up. "It really is a nice sword. Even though it's such a weird shape, it's really well balanced."

Tear couldn't resist a smile at the warmth in his expression. "I didn't realize you liked swords so much," she commented.

"Huh?" Surprised by her comment, Luke fumbled, nearly dropping the blade. "I- I don't really," he managed, putting the Sword of Lorelei back in its corner. Tear giggled. Really now, why was he trying to hide it? He was so cute when he got embarrassed. Tear felt her own cheeks take on a pinkish hue.

Luke sat back down on the bed, leaning back against the wall allowing silence to overtake them again.

"Ummm...Tear? Can... can I ask you for a favour?" He asked hesitantly, sitting up to look Tear in the eye.

"Of course."

"Would you sing your fonic hymns for me?"

"I can, but why?"

"I just... find them really calming," Luke managed, leaning back against the wall and closing his eyes.

"Sure," she answered softly, placing a hand gently over his. There was something bothering him, something stirring beneath the surface that had him on edge, but for now, Tear decided that she wouldn't pry. He would tell her when he was ready; she knew that he would. After indulging her all this time, trusting in that was really the least she could do.

*Twei Rei Tsuae Croix Ryo Twei Tsuae...*

"Hey Ginji," Asch popped his head in the pilot's cockpit. "How long until we're in Baticul?"

"Oh, hey there Luke-"
"Asch," the redhead corrected.

"Oh my goodness! I'm so sorry!" Ginji suddenly grew flustered, taking his eyes off the sky to get more than a quick glance at who was behind him. He had been so sure he'd seen Luke, but sure enough, Asch was standing there smiling at him. Ugh! It was terrible! What an awful person he was! He couldn't even keep his own two friends straight!

"It's alright," Asch laughed, nodding at Ginji to pay a bit more attention to the sky in front of them.

"No really, after all this time I should know better!" the young pilot berated himself.

"Don't worry about it," the redhead insisted. "How far are we?"

"Probably about fifteen minutes or so before we pull into port," Ginji answered.

"Actually, Ginji," Luke interrupted. Asch stepped aside so Ginji could see the other redhead who had just come up from the cabins. "Can we land outside the main entrance, rather than the port please?"

"Well we can I guess, but why do you want to go by land, Asch?"


"Argh! Sorry!" Ginji pulled at his silver hair in frustration. They had just gone over this!

"Really now you two," Jade said with an amused shake of his head. "How long do you plan on torturing the poor boy for getting it right?"

"What?" Anise jumped up. "Again?" Seriously those two, they hadn't made up for a week yet! She hated it when they fought because they just got annoying, but at least her sanity stayed intact.

Surprise, surprise, Luke and Asch both wore matching grins. Anise almost wished it would get old... but they were so damn good at it, she was sure her reaction made their whole stinking day every single time. Just wait, she'd get them figured out, then it would be her turn to gloat with that cocky grin of theirs. She was just counting the days...

The two redheads simultaneously shrugged. "It's alright," Asch said removing Luke's jacket. "Our time was just about up anyways."

Natalia let out a defeated sigh. "And here I was hoping the two of you might have outgrown that little game of yours."

"What fun would that be?" Luke asked, dawning his own coat.

"Plenty for us, actually," Natalia tossed in with a mock disproving glare. Luke stuck his tongue out and the entire cockpit erupted in laughter. Only Tear sat in her seat, watching the antics before her. The smiles on both redheads faces, the light in their eyes and yet... she couldn't help but wonder.

How long had the two of them been switched like that?

It was so strange, beneath all the embarrassment that usually ensued their little game, Tear had never really experienced anything but amusement at the final result. This time... she was surprised. It bothered her that she didn't know; that even with how special they were to her, she still couldn't tell them apart. The person she'd spent her time with the past couple days... she thought it was Luke, she truly did believe it had been him. The things he said, the warmth in his smile, they were
all pointing towards Luke... but she could never really be sure. Had they switched this morning? Yesterday? Or might it even have been since they left Feres Isle?

Tear looked up at the pair of them, each now with their respective clothes on. Noticing her uncertain shuffle, Luke caught her gaze and sent her a mischievous wink. The melodist let out a sigh of relief and returned his smile. Maybe, just maybe she was getting closer...

"Why did you two switch anyway?" Anise asked sceptically.

Luke shrugged. "For something to do." The younger sibling stole a glance at his older brother. Even he didn't know why Asch had wanted to trade places. Asch usually had a reason for it, so he'd been fine just playing along. Something had been on Asch's mind for awhile now, so if Luke could lift that burden from him, even if just for a short while, he was more than happy to do it. From the looks of things, whatever Asch had hoped to figure out while in Luke's place, he hadn't discovered. If anything, he looked even more concerned.

"You two have got to find a better pastime than driving us crazy! Take up knitting or something!"

Luke barely managed to suppress his laughter at the thought of Asch knitting before catching said sibling's backhand. Luke returned the shot but was also easily blocked before Asch kicked one of his feet out from under him and the younger redhead took a tumble, almost landing on Anise who had previously been happily seated on the floor.

"Hey! Watch where you're throwing your brother!" Anise protested, her voice rising over the laughter that filled the cockpit, only adding to the mirth.

"Okay you guys," Ginji called back, suppressing a chuckle of his own. "I'm going to be landing soon, you'd best take a seat."

"I hate this part," Anise grumbled.

"Really, all this time, and you're still afraid of flying?" Natalia inquired.

"I was never afraid of flying! I just... hate how bumpy landings always are."

"Well better landing than crashing," Jade commented.

"Shut up, Colonel!"

With an echoing chuckle, Ginji did his utmost to land smoothly in an open field not far outside Baticul's eastern entrance, just as Asch had asked him to. Everyone was curious as to the reason for the redhead's odd request but no one bothered to ask. Something was clearly on the monarch's mind and if anyone was the wiser to what it was, they weren't saying anything.

It was probably better that way though, from the looks of things, it might get stormy and Ginji had always said he hated leaving the Albiore in the port during storms. Too much got tossed around. Seriously, the Albiore was like his baby. Anise pitied the kid that was going to have to compete with the thing for his attention someday. Still, it's not like Asch knew in advance that the weather was going to suck, so he obviously had some other reason. Standing facing the wooden bridge that lead into the capital, it didn't look like he was planning on telling anyone what that reason was.

Small drops began to fall, leaving dark spots spattered across the ground, tracing their way along the bridge. Rain, just perfect, the young monarch swore that the weather was just trying to make this worse than it was bound to turn out to be. It surprised him just to what extent he was bothered. It didn't matter though, this was completely unavoidable. Asch took a deep breath.
"Natalia," the redhead unstrapped his weapon. "Hold onto this for me."

"But Asch-" the Kimlascan Princess barely had the time to protest before having the sheathed Sword of Lorelei forced into her arms. What in the world was he doing?

"Take care of it for a bit."

"Why, what's going-"

"There he is!" Four soldiers standing near the gates burst through the city's crowd and before anyone could voice a word of protest they had the oldest sibling surrounded. Asch instinctively took a defensive stance.

The first soldier charged forward snatching him by the coat and forcefully slamming him into the stone wall. A small stream of red appeared from his crimson hair, running down his face. The guard pressed him even harder against the wall but Asch stayed silent, offering no form of resistance.

"You are under arrest for treason," the soldier's voice declared and two of the other men moved in to restrain him. Forcing Asch around, the redhead stumbled, and was sent crashing into the stone ground, two soldiers now pinning him down.

"Stop it!" Luke yelled in outrage. "Let him go! It wasn't him!"

"Enough of this!" Natalia demanded. "Release him! We've uncovered the true culprits; we bring news to my father."

"Sorry Princess," the fourth guard offered. "But this goes beyond your jurisdiction, you'll have to take it up at the castle.

"No! This is nonsense, I refuse!"

"You can't arrest him!" Luke violently protested.

"Luke don't-" Asch intervened, but cut himself off when the soldiers looked ready to take it upon themselves to ensure he didn't try to raise a fuss.

"Why? It's not your fault!" Luke shook his head, ignoring what had become a steady drizzle coming down on them all. *This* was the reason! Luke had known Asch was nervous about something the whole way here, but he hadn't even been thinking! Asch was scared of coming back to Baticul, he had known this was what was waiting for him. But... but he had done it anyway, because they needed him to. Asch had been afraid but he came back for Luke and for everyone else! Luke wasn't going to let this happen!

'I trust you,' Asch said as he was forcefully hauled to his feet. 'Looks like I have you cleaning up my mess this time around... sorry.'

'Don't be. I swear if it's the last thing I do, I'll get you out of this.'

'I know you will,' Asch replied with a mental smile. 'Thank you.'

"Damn it!" Luke cursed as soon as Asch was out of an earshot.

"Will Asch be alright?" Mieu asked, his ears sagging as he hid from the rain under Luke's long red hair.
"He'd better be," Luke answered vehemently. "Or I'm going to have more than something to say about it."

"Might I suggest doing that talking up at the castle?" Jade interrupted. "It might have more of an effect that way."

"Jade's right," Natalia agreed, carefully clutching the Sword of Lorelei in her arms. "Let's get this sorted out as quickly as possible. We need to see my father."

The downpour that had quickly grown rather violent emptied the streets and Natalia couldn't be more grateful. She loved her people like no other, but they truly didn't have the time to dawdle today. If it were any other situation, the princess would at least like to believe that she wouldn't feel like the world was ending, but that wasn't the case. Her airways tied themselves into knots and the lack of air was nauseating. They all hurried, because they all knew.

The punishment for treason was death.

"He'll be alright," Luke offered. Natalia looked over at her cousin, but she knew full well he was equally trying to convince himself as he was trying to comfort her. Luke's eyes darted from her own, to what she was holding and back again. Then the implications of what she held onto suddenly reached her.

"Would you like to hang onto it?" Natalia offered the sword to her cousin. Really by all rights it should be Luke who guarded such a valuable thing. He was an isofons of Lorelei as well, after all; but Luke shook his head.

"No, he gave it to you."

"I'm not sure why, but-"

"Don't worry about it," Luke cut her off. "I'm the first one the God-Generals would expect to have it. It's safer with you."

"Well it won't be with me long," she added with a reassuring nod.

"Not while we have something to say about it," Luke agreed.

The castle was almost as empty as the streets had become and neither the princess nor the young noble bothered to take the time to fix themselves up. Water dripped from them making a trail that traced their movements up the stairs, and creating a small hazard for their companions who followed in their wake.

"Father!" Natalia burst in the throne room, interrupting a casual conversation he was having with one of the advisors.

"Natalia!" Ingobert looked up, surprised to see his daughter in disarray. "Luke, everyone, goodness what's the matter?"

"Father, they've arrested Asch."

"Yes, I just received word."

"Your Highness," Guy interrupted. "We have every reason to believe that he is being wrongfully imprisoned for a crime he did not commit."
"Do you have anything to back up these claims?" Ingobert asked.


"Then let us discuss the matter," he said, taking his place on the throne. "Who then, do you claim the true culprit to be?"

Luke stood before the king, meeting his unnerving stare and the young noble really had to hand it to his uncle. If it hadn't been for their chat in the library the last time they were here, he would have absolutely outraged at the cold and uncaring demeanour of the ruler before him. If nothing else though, Luke had learnt this: his uncle was just that... his uncle, family, and he was Asch's family as well. As someone who believed in and wanted to defend Asch, he had to remain indifferent lest his opinion and desires meet the same fate their father's had. Being the king, he wasn't so easily excluded from the court proceedings, but it was a very fine line he was treading. Yes, Luke could understand... and he also couldn't even begin to express how much he hated politics.

"We believe that the culprit is former Grand Maestro Mohs, current leader of the New Order of Lorelei," Luke declared.

"On what grounds do you make such accusations?" One of the courtiers demanded.

"We investigated one of his strongholds," Jade provided. "There we found a fomicry facility and a plethora of old military supplies." At a nod from the Colonel, Anise brought a package forward and handed it to the advisors.

"They are definitely ours," the men agreed, holding up the armour and an old banner. "The banner is somewhat outdated though, as is the design of the armour."

"We have very good reason to believe that it was replicas disguised as Kimlascan soldiers that attacked Malkuth," Jade stated. "Orchestrated by the New Order of Lorelei in pursuit of their own goals, not Asch fon Fabre."

"Then why did he flee?" The advisor demanded, doing nothing to mask his accusation.

"His goals were his own," Jade answered. "Perhaps to investigate the rumours of this New Order and its attempts at dragging you to war," he suggested slyly. "You'll have to ask him."

"If it is indeed this New Order of Lorelei, it would explain where the replicas have been coming from," Ingobert pointed out.

"That may be true but-"

"Replicas, you highness?" Guy asked.

"Recently there has been a huge surge in Baticul's population. People have turned up out of nowhere, many without any knowledge of the law or proper conduct. The outbreak of crime has been significant and much of the populace is uneasy. The lack of such basic knowledge among other things has lead us to believe that these people may be replicas."

"That would make sense," Guy agreed.

"Unfortunately, though many seem to have left, they are causing a good deal of civil unrest. Because of their crimes, innocent though the replicas may be, they are all subject to a good deal of abuse and are straining the economy. There is little we can do."
"Well we've shut down the facility that we investigated," Natalia said. "However, I don't doubt that the New Order of Lorelei will continue to produce the replicas despite this fact."

"Word of this New Order has travelled quickly," Ingobert replied. "With the return of the miasma, many people have already requested that we seek their assistance."

"I don't believe that to be wise," Natalia stated. "Their goals are to see the Score fulfilled which would mean war and who knows what other atrocities."

"Yet, they claim to have the Seventh Fonstone," an advisor stated. "They could know of the prosperity that might lie beyond such hardships."


"And how do you know that?"

"Because we have it," Luke shot back.

"What?"

"Father," Natalia jumped in. "I propose a summit between the world's powers. Now is the time more than ever to work together to overcome the problems that our world now faces. Kimlasca, Malkuth and even Daath must unite to find a solution that will benefit not just one country, but all the people of this world. We should share a common stand be it with or against this New Order, however it is decided between us all. If we are divided now, then we shall be doomed to fail."

"But what of the Seventh Fonstone?" the courtier asked.

"We will guard its location until an agreement is made on what should be done with it," Natalia answered.

"I believe that to be a fair proposition," Ingobert agreed. "Call for an immediate council meeting!"

"Sir!" Several men all left the throne room to issue their respective summons.

"Don't worry," Ingobert said quietly as he passed them by. "You've done well, things should go more smoothly from here on out. I won't let anything happen to Asch."

"I guess that went about as well as it could have," Guy commented once the room was empty save for his friends.

"All that's left is to await their decision," Natalia agreed. "Let us hope it is a wise one."

"Make one more lap Luke, and I'm going to have Tokunaga knock your legs out," Anise commented.

Luke stopped and looked up at the annoyed glare he was getting from the former Fon Master Guardian. Sitting haphazardly on the steps, her chin resting on the object of her threat, she was none too pleased with the small rut Luke had set out to dig in the castle floor over the past two hours. Looking around, he could identify various degrees of irritation radiating from his friends who had all found themselves a place to sit in the entryway. Even Ginji had joined them after waiting for Noelle's arrival, but how could they all be so patient?

Guy sighed when despite Anise's threat, Luke returned to his pacing. He needed something to channel all that nervous energy into, but he was really only making things worse. It wasn't the first
time in the past hour or so that Guy was entertaining the thought of going next door and sicking Luke's mother on him, if only to distract him from the eternity that the court was taking to make a decision. As appealing as that plan may be, all it would do is add one more person's anxiety to the equation and if the former attendant knew one thing, it was that Lady Fabre could worry enough for all of them.

For all that things had gone down pretty nasty as far as Asch was concerned lately; the blond hoped he'd be able to get out of this tangle relatively unharmed. He didn't doubt that the future monarch's neck would come out intact, but there were a handful of other issues the redhead would have to work his way out of, not the least of which would be getting permission to leave again. Given the trouble he was in, his usual intimidation tactics wasn't in the bag of tricks he could pull out. No, at times like this, Guy didn't envy Asch's position in the least.

"I wonder how much longer they'll be," Tear wondered.

"Unfortunately if the past is any indication, it could be days," Natalia answered. "It depends on how agreeable all the members are and how willing those who don't support the proposal are to sway."

"You wouldn't think they'd be so opposed to just talking," Anise commented.

"It's not just the idea of talking though," Natalia pointed out. "Even if they do agree to talk, they must decide what stand Kimlasca is going to take on all the matters involved."

"But they aren't going to do that now," Luke interrupted. "They'll meet again later to decide that stuff. After all, it's not like we've even made a proposal to Peony yet. The reason it's taking so long is because they're figuring out what to do with Asch."

"Most likely," Jade agreed. "However, deciding what to do with Asch is directly tied to the stand they will take on the New Order of Lorelei. If they drop Asch's charges, they will have to assign the blame elsewhere, meaning they are going to stand against Mohs."

"It's a big decision," Guy said. "Things could get ugly for Kimlasca if Malkuth doesn't share their stance. Given that Mohs has proven he has his own army and the fact that he has the support of the people, they're taking a huge chance on this. They don't have the military strength to fight both Malkuth and Mohs' New Order if Peony goes the other way."

"But Peony isn't likely to support Mohs," Tear pointed out.

"True, but they don't know that," the blond replied, "and they can't just take our word for it. To them, it's still a gamble."

"You'd think something like that shouldn't matter. It's still the truth that Asch didn't do it," Luke commented. "But it's not that simple, no matter how much it should be."

"It is pretty stupid, isn't it?" Guy asked and was rewarded by a grateful smile from his best friend. Luke really had come a long way in these two months. He knew the world his brother lived in, could navigate it to some extent, and could see the complexities that had so easily evaded him before. Of course, that didn't mean he had to like it. It was almost harder on him, because he could see just to what extent the two of them, Asch in particular, were used as political tools. Was it really any wonder they guarded their hyperresonance so carefully?

What Guy really didn't want to consider was how much the fact that Luke was a replica was probably playing into their discussions. From the sounds of things, there were a lot more replicas
around than they'd given Mohs credit for and the problems they were causing just from their lack of knowledge was quickly giving them a bad reputation. It wasn't their fault; they didn't know any better. The problem was with your average everyday person, who also didn't know any better. Add that conflict to the mix, and the fact that the enemy had himself a replica army; and Guy was wondering just how many of those thick-headed idiots in there doubted Luke solely because of how he was born.

"I hate politics."

"Asch!" Luke almost tackled his sibling who came through the door, the latter still rubbing his wrists, reddened as they were from the restraints he'd been in. Completely caught off guard by his little brother's gesture, the young monarch nearly fell over, but managed to steady both himself and his sibling. The bitter expression on his face faded and he let Luke hold onto him.

"You're alright," Natalia commented with a smile, once Asch managed to detach Luke. "I believe this is yours." She handed him the Sword of Lorelei.

"Thank you," Asch replied, accepting the Sword from her and re-equipping it.

"How's your head?" She inquired worriedly. It looked like the soldiers had at least bandaged the wound they'd inflicted while subduing him, but the deep crimson stain told them that no healer had been by to see him. "Here." Natalia quickly moved around to the side, untying the bandage before he had a chance to protest. "Honestly," she grumbled. "You would think they needn't be so violent, they probably gave you a concussion."

"Well if his history is any indication of how they expected him to react, it's not much surprise they felt the need to use excessive force," Jade said slyly. "After all there were only four of them."

"Just what are you implying old man?"

"I'm just saying that you can be needlessly violent when the mood strikes you," he shrugged.

"Asch, ignore him for the moment," Natalia forced the redhead to look at her. "How do you feel?"

"Natalia, I'm fine," Asch protested, rolling his eyes in annoyance. Luke only smirked; he was being fawned over by Natalia and he was loving every second of it.

'You shut up too,' Asch tossed.

'Oh I'm not worried about you having a concussion,' Luke shrugged. 'You've always been brain damaged, but you somehow function just fine.'

'You and Jade are just asking for it, aren't you?' The older sibling tried to sound threatening but failed as bits of laughter and amusement trickled through.

"So what's the final verdict?" Guy asked when Natalia forced Asch to sit on the steps so she could better see what she was doing.

"The council apparently decided to support the idea of a summit and will work with Malkuth to try and find a solution to the miasma," Asch provided. "They want me to go with Natalia to make the proposition."

"That's great!" Ginji cheered. "That means you get to come with us, right?"

"Yeah," Asch nodded. "In the meantime they're going to work on what stand they're going to take
on each of the issues to be discussed.”

"Well at the very least your head looks like it should be fine," Natalia declared. "So negotiations oughtn't be exceptionally difficult."

"I guess we're off to Grand Chokmah next then, huh?" Anise said with a sigh.

"You sound disappointed," Tear pointed out.

"Not really, I was just wondering when we're going back to Daath. I want to see how Ion is doing!"

"I'm sure we'll make it there soon enough," Jade provided. "We may need to employ Daath as a location for the summit seeing as we'll need neutral territory and Yulia City is technically on Malkuth ground."

"I know..." Anise grumbled. "I just don't trust Arietta. Who knows what she's doing to him while no one's there to watch over him!"

"Why don't I stay here?" Noelle suggested. "Once you guys talk about stuff with Peony, you can let us know over the transmitters and I can bring everyone on this end where they need to go. It'll be much faster that way."

"Are you sure, Noelle?" Guy asked.

"Of course," she replied cheerfully.

"Alright then, we should head off to Grand Chokmah as soon as we can," Asch stood up. "I love Baticul, I really do, but I am more than ready to get out of here."

"Fair enough," Guy conceded. "Maybe your reception will be a little warmer next time."

"I'd rather not think of how they would plan to make it any worse," the future monarch shot back with a smirk.

'So...' Luke began as they stepped out into the rain. 'What did you really say to convince them to let you go?'

'Don't ask,' Asch replied.

'That bad?'

'I'm pushing my luck.'

'You're always pushing your luck,' Luke commented slyly.

'I told them if they didn't plan on letting me go they'd better throw me right back in the dungeon, because that was the only way I was staying.'

'Ouch,' Luke almost winced. 'You are pushing your luck.'

'Yeah well, let's find out how long it plans to hold.'

Emperor Peony sat silently on his throne, having just listened to the story his latest guests had told him. Being the deceptively cunning person that he was, deciphering exactly what he was thinking in response to the tale that Asch and his companions had recounted was next to impossible. Many
people who met Peony wouldn't think such a thing of the Malkuth Emperor, but those who truly knew him, knew much better than that. Peony was far too cunning for his own good; he just directed said cunning in all the wrong places. After all, who else was good enough to keep even Jade in line?

"I'm glad to hear the charges against you were dropped," Peony commented. "I was beginning to think I'd have some new competition to corrupt."

"Thank you, your Majesty," Asch replied, unable to keep the full smirk off his face.

"I'll present it to the council, but I don't see there being any opposition to the summit you've proposed. We've had our share of problems with the recent surge of replicas too, and the miasma is causing a good deal of concern with the people. I don't want to support Mohs' New Order, but he definitely has his claws in everyone."

"That seems to be a common obstacle," Natalia stated. "I believe if the two countries can come to a common stance on the matter, it may help reassure the people."

"Something definitely has to be done; things right now are just chaotic." Peony shook his head.

"Yes, and they're only going to get worse," Luke said solemnly.

Anise sighed, just listening to everyone talk politics was putting her to sleep, forget the fact she was out on it to begin with. It wasn't like she didn't know that all this stuff had to happen, but why did it have to be so boring! Now that she didn't have to report all the little details of what she heard, Anise was really discovering how little she cared for any of it. It was definitely more Ion's cup of tea; she didn't get what anyone saw in this stuff! Here all her friends were still going on and on despite having been talking for what was at least an hour now, discussing ins and outs that she didn't even think would have to be considered.

The former Fon Master Guardian would give it to Peony though, for all his quirks, he was totally in business mode. Then again, she wondered if he actually thought any of them hadn't noticed his eyes kept landing on Natalia's chest. Asch certainly had, Anise almost giggled. He was trying to be as inconspicuous as he could while he slowly shuffled over. Luke was smart, he'd put himself near Tear to begin with.

Anise looked around, why wasn't anyone standing near her? Why was Peony so intent on staring at Natalia's cleavage, anyway? It wasn't like she was all that well endowed! Sure maybe Anise wasn't much now, but she'd definitely fill out, maybe not as nicely as Tear, but better than Natalia! Peony had no foresight at all!

Ugh! Just how much longer were they going to talk? Anise wasn't entirely sure just how much more of this she was going to be able to take. Asch was going into this willingly? Man, he was messed in the head somewhere; then again, they all knew that already. Anise giggled; she'd probably find it more interesting if she participated, but for the most part, while she could follow along, she could never quite grasp at all the subtle complexities that had to be considered and usually just ended up sounding stupid.

At least before she had Luke who could always be counted on to ask or suggest something stupider and take the pressure off her, but he must have been getting private lessons from Asch or something because he was right up there with the rest of them blithering on about... well whatever they were talking about. Anise had lost track of the conversation somewhere around Mohs talking people into becoming his little Score slaves.
Shuffling at the front of the room caught Anise's attention and she looked up to see Peony standing from the throne. Finally!

"I'll call for the council to gather," Peony said, a nod sent several members of the court off to issue summons. "You're more than welcome to stay at the palace here," the monarch offered. "Though I'm sure Guy will offer you his place," he added with a wink.

"Well you can stay there if you'd like," Guy replied. "But it might be a bit easier to stay at the Palace. My manor isn't especially well staffed or anything."

"Or fully furnished," Asch added with smirk.


"I'll have someone prepare some rooms," Peony laughed. "It may be awhile before we get everything sorted out and arranged with Kimlasca."

"Actually, Your Majesty, there is a transmitter on the Albiore that you can use to speed up the negotiations in terms of location and time," Jade provided. "Noelle has remained in Baticul so we can send messages through her. We can also facilitate the transport process at your Majesty's request."

"Always a convenient solution," the Emperor said with a smirk. "You're going to run out of good ideas one of these days."

"I wish for nothing more than for His Majesty to live that long," Jade replied with a mock bow. He was rewarded by a wave from the blond monarch as he walked away.

"What do you think?" Anise asked once Peony and his court had left the room. "You think they'll go for it?"

"I doubt there will be much opposition to the discussions with Kimlasca," Jade answered. "Though there may be some underlying resentment towards prior aggressive acts, with Kimlasca offering a proper explanation, I don't imagine that should be much of a roadblock. The rate-limiting step will be deciding how they will stand and what issues they want to address at the summit."

"I guess it's a waiting game for now," Asch commented.

"I hate those," Anise grumbled.

"So do I," the redhead agreed.

"We may be able to be productive in the meantime," Jade suggested.

"I suppose that's a good point," Natalia agreed, "but where do we even begin."


"Yeah," Asch agreed. "So, old man, where's the library around here?"

Asch looked up from the book that he had found himself engrossed in. The redhead was surprised to find the moon hanging in the sky out the window, darkness creeping in, held back solely by the small fonstone lamp he'd appropriated early that evening. Everyone had left, given up at supper time and he said he'd follow as soon as he finished that book, but one lead to two and well... now they were probably all wondering where he was.
'It's alright,' Luke said sleepily. 'I told them you'd probably gotten yourself lost in a book.'

'You don't sound too worried,' Asch teased.

'I would have been, if you hadn't done it for seven years now,' Luke answered sceptically.

'Are you in bed?'

'Have you looked at what time it is?'

'Sorry,' Asch answered with a chuckle, but Luke's mind was already drifting off.

Setting down the book he had been reading, Asch placed it on the pile of others he'd sifted through. Not surprisingly, Malkuth's royal library didn't have much of anything that could possibly relate to the miasma or potential ways to get rid of it, something like that would have to wait for Daath. Maybe Ion would have some ideas, Luke had mentioned Ion intended to do some research once he was up and about, and he was sure that the young Fon Master would be the first to look into a matter like this.

All things considered, the afternoon had been quite the waste of time, but Asch couldn't really say he didn't enjoy reading. It was nice to get lost in the words on a page and he was sure he'd ploughed his way through more books than usual; unfortunately not to any avail. The miasma was the standing issue, and there wasn't much chance that the summit would come up with a way to resolve it, even with both sides employing their greatest minds towards the search for a solution. There was just too little known about the toxic fog. Yulia City may not be a bad place to look; they must have some kind of library.

Asch looked out the window again; Luke was right, it really was getting late. He should have called it a night awhile ago, but he'd found quite a few interesting looking books, including a census of Malkuth that curiously counted Akzeriuth among its citizens. It made sense, seeing as Akzeriuth had officially been a Malkuth city, but Asch could recall a similar book in the Kimlascan Royal library that stated the exact same thing, claiming Akzeriuth's population as its own. A frown settled in; now neither country did. They had to stop Van... Asch refused to let this entire world be a forgotten page in a history book.

A shadowed figure standing near the window startled the redhead as he turned the corner. Taking a defensive stance, Asch dropped the last book he was carrying, startling the intruder.

"Asch," Peony let out a sigh of relief. "What are you doing up and about so late?"

"I'd ask the same thing of you, but that seeing as this is your palace, that would be rude."

"Yeah well, the fun thing about not being a ruler yet, is that you don't have to observe all the formalities," Peony said with a wink.

"Well since we're throwing the rules out the window, do mind if I ask you something?"

"Go for it," Peony offered. "You may not get an answer though."

"What's up with you and the Score?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"The first time I suggested it to Kimlasca's court, it took me hours to even get them to start thinking about abandoning the Score. With you, it never even took five minutes."
"You obviously weren't there when I had to present it to Malkuth's court," Peony commented. "I'd bet they're ten times more stubborn than Kimlasca's."

"Old cods are just that, no matter what school they're from," Asch said with a shrug. Peony erupted into laughter.

"We have got to separate you and Jade; he's having a terrible influence on you."

"Why were you so willing to abandon the Score?"

"What makes you think I was willing?"

"To accept such an obviously radical idea so quickly, you had to have given it some serious thought before it was even proposed." Asch waited expectantly, but Peony didn't have a witty reply to offer.

"What happened?" Asch asked.

"Nothing worth noting," Peony replied.

"Should I be asking Jade?"

"I don't know how much he'd be able to tell you, he was already in Grand Chokmah by that point."

"So it does have to do with Nephry."

"How did you figure that out?"

"Because you just told me." Asch smiled slyly. "Besides, who else would it be outside of Grand Chokmah?"

Peony grinned in defeat. "Nothing gets past you does it?"

"Not when I have something to say about it."

"Well it was a long time ago," the emperor shrugged. "I was still living in Keterburg at the time. After the professor's death, Jade was adopted into the military, and it didn't take Saphir long to start chasing after him. They both vanished off the face of the planet as far as we were concerned, isolated way up north. Only the odd whispers would reach our ears."

"Jade the Necromancer..." Asch guessed. Those rumours had spread all the way to Kimlasca, no surprise they'd made it to Keterburg.

"The first night I went to see her, was to bring her news I'd gotten from Grand Chokmah," Peony explained. "That Jade was safe, so was Saphir. I'd never seen Nephry so happy. All I could think of was that I wanted to be able to make her smile like that again. Jade was one of my closest friends, with him gone, I felt it was my responsibility to look after her."

"Then it grew to something more than that."

"We grew closer and closer each time I climbed that tree to her window sill with my half written letters, trivial news that I never even ended up telling her... until one day, I heard rumours of the death of my last living brother. I was called back to the capital. Still I swore to her that I would return for her, I refused to let anything come between us, no matter what."

"Vows like that are far too easily broken," Asch commented.
"You sound like you have experience."

"More than I'd like to," the redhead smiled sadly. Peony nodded.

"We still wrote each other though," he continued. "For almost seven years we held onto our feelings for each other, never once did they even flicker."

"So what ended up happening?"

"Then one year, Nephry had her Score read, and it told her that she would marry. She would marry someone else."

Silence fell across the library, the only light coming from a shimmering fonstone in the corner. The shadows cast on the emperor's face only further darkened his expression. Asch waited patiently, his eyes tracing the pale light of the moon reflected as it was in Peony's eyes.

"Jade bought me time; I left for Keterburg that night," Peony finally began to speak again. "I told her to forget the Score, that it didn't mean a thing; neither of us wanted to accept it anyway. I asked her to leave with me. I told her I'd abandon my country, that we could take off and be together, escape the absolution that the Score demanded. Then Nephry told me something I will never forget."

"What was that?"

"She told me that I was born with the status and the ability to become the emperor, and that even if I could abandon my country, I could never abandon the people in it."

Peony smiled sadly, losing his gaze among the stars in the heavens.

"That was the night we said goodbye."

"She was right," Asch broke the silence. "You're too good of a person to have abandoned your people."

"You think so?" the Emperor asked, his face growing serious.

"Yeah, and you're not all that good at hiding it," the redhead teased.

"Shouldn't you be off to bed or something?" Peony asked.

"Yeah yeah," Asch conceded, replacing the last book on the shelf.

"Hey watch it, I said you don't have to observe all the formalities, not that you didn't have to observe any."

"I'll take my chances."

"Would you do it?" Peony's question froze Asch in the doorway. Asch remained silent for several minutes.

"Yes."

"Liar."

"Don't be so sure, after all, my own country locked me up. Besides, it's not like they haven't proven they can replace me if need be."
"You still wouldn't do it," Peony declared. "You're too kind."

"Try me."

"You may think that and you can deny it until you're as old and foggy as Jade is," Peony almost whispered, passing by the young Kimlascan. "It's different when it comes right down to it."

"I'm not you," the redhead replied silently. "What makes you think I have that kind of strength?"

"Because..." Peony turned and grinned before vanishing into the shadows of the hallway. "You're not all that good at hiding it either."
Goodbye

In the end it took the world leaders a total of two weeks to make all the arrangements necessary for the summit; an impressive feat given the magnitude of what was being decided. As Natalia and her friends had anticipated and much to Anise's delight, Daath had been chosen as a neutral location for the summit to occur. Everyone else was just as pleased; two weeks of nothing but her whining was more than Natalia was capable of tolerating and even Grand Chokmah's finest amenities had done little to appease her impatience to reunite with the Fon Master.

Red and blue uniforms decorated Daath's streets and were interspersed among the silver armour of the Oracle Knights on duty at the cathedral. While the Kimlascan Princess knew that Ion would have no problems with the presence of the country's respective militaries to help with security, Natalia was mildly concerned that the soldiers themselves might, but thankfully there didn't seem to be much tension between them. If anything, the Oracle Knights were grateful for the temporary supplement to what had become their rather meagre numbers. More Knights than Natalia had realized seemed to have left with Mohs and the God-Generals. Even Daath was poorly equipped to deal with the threat of the New Order.

Security was tight and thankfully the summit had begun without incident. Much to all their surprise, Teodoro had stepped in to represent Daath as a mediator between the countries at Ion's request. Apparently the young Fon Master still wasn't well enough to be tending to such an important affair. They'd yet to find an opportunity to meet with Ion, but apparently he was doing much better than when they'd left him, so while Anise was extremely put off by the fact they couldn't go see him, her worries were appeased enough that she'd ceased driving them all up the wall.

It seemed that word of Ion's illness had spread through Daath, much like any other news seemed to in the city, and there were countless flowers among other gifts lining the stairways up to and around the cathedral. The sheer amount of support that the people in Daath had for him warmed Natalia's heart; it was a comforting reminder that people were able and willing to change. After all, it was Ion who had taken away the Score, and yet there were still so many people who supported him, even while Mohs offered to return it to them. There was still hope for this world, the God-Generals and Van just simply couldn't see that.

The summit was estimated to take several days, and everyone was more than eager to hear what the final outcome would be. It wasn't simply a matter of war or no war; the entire future of the world could very well depend on the choices made today. It was no exaggeration to say that everyone was a bit on edge, but thus far there hadn't been any problems. None the less they had taken it upon themselves to patrol the streets, walking among the red and blue soldiers making sure that nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Little was going on outside of the usual comings and goings in the Holy City, in fact, much like the two capitals had been, things were surprisingly normal around Daath given the return of the miasma. It seemed that, at least for the time being, people had gotten used to its presence. Not that they had much choice. By now the miasma had managed to infiltrate just about every facility, not only in Daath but across Auldrant. It was a problem that was impossible to escape... even for the countries. Natalia knew it was unlikely that either Kimlasca or Malkuth had a solution for the miasma, despite it being the key issue at the summit. They all hoped an answer could be found, but so far, they hadn't any success in uncovering one.

Beside her, Asch yawned. It was nice to see him joining them, and she suspected Luke had an
Asch had spent a greater part of the last couple days in Daath's library trying to unearth any sort of information that might help them deal with the miasma, but he hadn't come across anything yet. Even the ancient books from Yulia's time had little to offer; they hadn't been able to eliminate the miasma back then either, after all. Instead Yulia had raised the Outer Lands... but such a feat was not in the realm of possibility this time. The world was only beginning to discover the simplest of technologies that had been common place back then.

One step at a time, Natalia reminded herself; they would handle the affairs with Mohs and Van, and then they could deal with the miasma, hopefully before it began claiming lives. Things were calm now, but as soon as people began dying... chaos would ensue, and they'd have little power to stop it.

Asch's hand came to rest on her shoulder, and he offered Natalia a comforting smile. Whether he'd guessed what was on her mind, or he could simply tell she was fretting, she was grateful for the gesture. Though he seemed somewhat weary from the recent string of late nights, Natalia was so happy to see him back to being himself. Ever since he'd settled affairs between himself and Luke, he seemed happier and while many of the things that had worried him remained unresolved, he was making an effort not to let that weigh him down. Natalia wondered what had inspired the sudden change, but such particulars weren't something he'd likely admit to, much less tell her.

Asch yawned again, this time earning him a grumble from Anise, who had taken a seat next to Luke on some abandoned crates. Despite the activity in the city there weren't nearly as many people coming and going, leaving the main road into Daath relatively bare and making it a good place to sit down for a bit. They were just killing time now. Three days in... the summit could conclude at almost any time, and Natalia was certain she wasn't the only one eager to find out the results.

"A nap doesn't sound like a bad idea," Luke commented, showing a bit of his sibling's lack of sleep. Their unique connection most certainly had its flaws; it must be annoying at times to have to deal with the consequences of each other's actions. Yet... had it always as such? Natalia didn't remember it ever being that way before, and though she admittedly didn't know to look for it, she would have noted if they had both seemed tired at the same time on multiple occasions.

"Well that's what you get for staying up so late," Anise taunted.

"I haven't been," Luke shot back. The younger redhead sighed and let Anise continue to bug him about being lazy letting Mieu who was happily perched on his head take up his defence. It was more or less true. Between two weeks in Grand Chokmah and now here in Daath, it wasn't like they were doing much of anything. He'd joined Asch for a few hours in the afternoon to help him research the miasma, but he didn't have the patience to sit down and read non-stop for more than a couple hours at a time.

Luke really wished he could have spent some time with Ion, but with the summit, the cathedral was locked down tight. The public was refused access and even they were only allowed into the main entrance and library. It would have to wait until the summit was over before he could look into visiting his friend. He'd been worried about the young Fon Master since leaving him in Daath almost a month ago now, but everyone said he was on the mend so at the very least Luke could breathe easy for a bit. If the miasma was around, and Ion was still getting better, then he would definitely be fine, even bearing the burden of Tear's illness.

For all that was going wrong right now between Mohs, the miasma and Master Van; Luke wished these times would last forever. Everyone was happy, laughing... really, there wasn't anything more that Luke wished for. He wanted the whole world to be happy, to be able to enjoy time spend with
people they treasured. Friendship, love... a world filled with such wonderful feelings, was it really so bad? There was good here too, why couldn't Master Van understand that?

Sadly, these times wouldn't even last the next ten minutes, and they were cut off by Guy jumping up from his seat, a dark expression on his face suddenly contrasting the smile that had been on it a split second earlier. Everyone immediately silenced themselves, standing up to see what had caught their friend's attention.

Jade turned ever so slightly, just enough to catch a glance from the corner of his eye. The purple uniform of their unexpected guest blended into the sea of maroons created by the miasma, allowing the God-General to go unnoticed for far longer than she would have otherwise been capable. Not that she was attempting to avoid detection. The subtle twitch of her eye betrayed the surprise that she otherwise covered with a menacing grin. It looked like neither side had intended to cross paths. What then was her objective here?

"Well well," Cantabile began, her smirk widening. "Looks like luck is on my side, here I was expecting to have to hunt you down."

'Damn it!' Luke cursed. 'What's she doing here?'

'She's probably here to interfere with the summit,' Asch answered, taking a defensive stance. 'If both countries agree to unite against Mohs and Van, it's going to make things harder for them. As long as the world is unorganized, we're nothing but easy pickings.'

'Maybe Daath wasn't the best place for the summit after all,' Luke conceded, never taking his eyes off the cocky God-General.

'We've come this far, no way are we letting her interfere now.'

"What do you want, Cantabile?" Asch demanded. Everyone's drawn weapons tightened in their owner's grip. They were more than well versed in Cantabile's spontaneity.

"What do I want? Well that's a loaded question," Cantabile said, making a show of pretending to ponder it. "I can think of a lot of things, but for starters... I'll take your head on a stick!"

Asch's sword was up long before the God-Generals' strike landed, proving that the attempt hadn't been a serious one. Playful or not, the tension snapped and it didn't take half a second for both Guy and Luke to move in. Cantabile blocked both their onslaughts and Luke only narrowly sidestepped her retaliating swing. Guy wasn't as quick and the sheath she'd also drawn landed square in the center of his chest, knocking him back and sending the air fleeing from his lungs. Jade's arte crashed down but Cantabile dodged, using the recoil to send her towards Asch.

The older redhead deflected the initial strike but was forced to put his skills to the test in her ensuing onslaught. Her hits were clean and smooth, each with a precise level of force, drawing out the most of his strength with each hit, leaving the attacker unaffected. The blades locked, Asch firmly staring down his opponent, refusing to show how effective her tactics were. Cantabile's smirk widened into a malicious grin.

"No Jewel yet I see," she said, allowing her eye to dart down before returning to its harassment of the young monarch. Asch silently cursed. With that playful tone and mocking grin, he couldn't tell if she was confirming that fact or trying to taunt him.

Shifting her weight, Asch was thrown off balance and as he leaned forward, Cantabile's hand reached around. All his senses flared and the young monarch recoiled, leaping back and away,
Cantabile's brown glove just barely grazing the hilt of the sword she'd been after.

"Tch," Cantabile spat. "You're quicker than I gave you credit for."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Asch said, a cocky grin of his own spreading across his face. No wonder she didn't seem to be going for a fatal hit like she always did when coming after him or Luke. Her focus was on the Sword of Lorelei.

"Don't," she answered. "I don't give compliments to murderers!"

"Funny," Asch shot back. "You call us murderers for something our father did, and yet you're the one who's planning to kill everyone on Auldrant. Which one of us is really the murderer?"

Cantabile stared him down, eyes burning with anger, the intense temper they had all come to know flaring in full force. "Don't..." she seethed, gathering up the fury that had consumed her. "Don't you ever compare me to the likes of you!"

The God-General launched herself at Asch again. Luke jumped into her path, intercepting the hit before Cantabile expected it to land, throwing the balance of her strike off. Asch ducked around, but she wasn't so easily fooled and her sheath came down to intercept the hit. Occupied on both sides, Guy moved in. Cantabile ducked down, kicking Luke's feet out, she spun around throwing Asch aside and met Guy's attack.

"You'll have to try a bit harder than that," Cantabile taunted, her free blade knocking another of Tear's knives from the air, snatching one of the projectiles, she redirected it at Anise who was forced to block it with Tokunaga, losing the small blade somewhere in her doll's cotton depths. Damn it all, Cantabile could still hold her own against all of them... she was really something else.

"Of course," she continued, "you can try all you like; there aren't any options left to you anymore."

"What do you mean by that?" Tear demanded.

"You must realize it by now," Cantabile explained, evading both Jade's and Asch's artes and returning to her assault on Luke. "Even if you were to stop Van, to win, to get everything that you're aiming for... everyone will still die. There's no way to get rid of the miasma, no way to seal it up again. You've no choice. The only way this world will live on, is for Van to succeed."

"But either way the people of this world die," Natalia argued. "That's hardly a choice at all!"

"Are you really that twisted?" Cantabile asked. "Are you so selfish that you'll take away the future of this world because you don't get to live to be there? You don't get to survive, so everything should just cease to exist with you?"

"That's not what we're saying!" Natalia replied, but her voice lacked a shade of conviction.

"Isn't it?"

"It's not," Tear declared. "People can change, people can grow. Why? Because they believe in the future, they believe that no matter how dire circumstances may be, that there is a way to overcome it. Right now there are so many people working hard to make a change in this world, so that things like Hod never have to happen again."

"That's a lie. People are motivated by fear. They unite now because of they can see what might happen, they're afraid of the miasma and its consequences. Once they're safe and comfortable... then what? They'll go right back. Hod will happen again and again and again until there's nothing
"Just how do you intend to make that any different in the replica world you're creating?" Jade inquired, loosing a mass of third fonons that forced Cantabile to stop her attack on the redheads, temporary that it may be. "The replicas may or may not be bound by the fate of the Score, but they are still bound by human nature. It is our nature to compete for survival, to try and outdo each other. Such a basic fact will not be erased by creating replicas. This new world of yours will not be an Eldrant."

'Eldrant?' Luke asked curiously.

'It's the name of a 'glorious land' in ancient Ispanian legend. No pain, no sadness; but really it just represents the concept of a perfect world, it isn't actually possible,' Asch replied.

"You're wrong," Cantabile shook her head. "We'll escape the Score of destruction, the Score that demands wars and death, we'll escape all of it! I won't let you stop us!"

Unnerved by the conversation, Cantabile's calculated moves were no longer so; not that it made her any less challenging of an opponent. If anything, she was all the more fierce and her true strength was starting to show. Cantabile was fast, maybe not quite on par with Sync, but she was up there, and anyone who crossed her probably didn't last long enough to realize that wasn't where her real talent lay.

Cantabile's greatest attribute had to be her endurance. Everyone was starting to show signs of weariness, and even Luke couldn't quite manage to hide his laboured breath. Cantabile looked perfectly fine... and she was fighting all seven of them! Noticing that he wasn't fully paying attention, the God-General decided to take full advantage of the opening and Luke scrambled to keep up with her onslaught.

Luke's arms were like lead, burning with each hit as it drew the utmost of his remaining strength with each half-hearted parry. He just couldn't keep this up, his lungs were screaming for air, no longer able to sustain him with the meagre amounts they could pull through the miasma. He just needed an opening, just one opening...

He saw it, after a double strike on Cantabile's behalf, Luke parried outwards, throwing the surprised God-General wide open. He ducked down, out of her main line of defence and struck. Pain flew through his head; he was a split second to late and Cantabile's elbow crashed down on him, throwing off whatever little balance he had. Her sword lined itself neatly above him, its sharp edge dancing victoriously over the crippled young noble.

Luke rolled over, the sword dropping harmlessly into the dirt with far less force than he would have expected. The blade fell over, blood falling beside it. Luke looked up to see two separate arrows protruded from Cantabile's shoulder, a giant dark pool spreading around them where her uniform was absorbing the blood. Completely undeterred, she was already in the process of ripping the first one out. The young noble got himself out of the way none too soon as Jade's art crashed down, sending torrents of water over their injured opponent. Luke cringed; at least one of Cantabile's bones had broken. It didn't matter how many times he heard it, he hated that sound.

The God-General's breath was laboured and the way her arm hung identified it as the source of the sound. She began to laugh.

"Damn, just can't catch a break," she managed, the evil glimmer in her eye never abating. "Looks like I'll just have to wait for another time." Asch and Guy both charged at her, but she bolted down an alleyway, heading for the city's outskirts.
"That was close," Natalia said, lowering her bow and replacing the arrow in her quiver. "I wonder if she was trying to interfere with the summit."

"That would make sense," Tear agreed. "But her comments sounded like she had some other purpose in mind."

"Well if she plans on coming back, we'd better be there to stop her," Asch declared.

"Yes," Natalia said. "It might be more cautious if we were to stay closer to the cathedral in case she tries again."

"With injuries like that I doubt she'll return," Jade stated. "But a little extra caution wouldn't hurt. She may still try to send someone else."

"Do you think she meant what she said about the miasma?" Anise asked, keeping pace beside Jade as they walked back towards the chapel in the heart of Daath.

"Which part?" Jade inquired.

"You know," Anise scowled. "The part about how we won't be able to do anything about it, how Van's replica world is the only way to survive."

"I almost wonder if perhaps Van doesn't have a solution for us," Natalia pondered. "If we're unable to eliminate the miasma, could we not use his technology to create a replica world and simply move the originals there?"

"It would be impossible," Jade intervened. "In order for his replica world to be stable, he has to destroy Lorelei, the essence of the Seventh Fonon; otherwise the replicated land will simply dissipate and return to the Planet Storm. Destroying Lorelei and the Seventh Fonon would cause instability in a world that consists of originals, where everything is made of a balance of fonons, not entirely of the Seventh."

"Even if it would work, we don't have any way of getting people up there," Guy pointed out. "Even with both Albiores we can only carry a handful of people at a time. We're talking about millions of people that would have to be moved."

"I guess you're right," Natalia conceded. Truly, there had to be some sort of solution.

"Maybe Van really does have the answer," Asch said.

"What do you mean?" Anise asked.

"Hey old man, couldn't we use a hyperresonance to neutralize the miasma?"

"Like Akzeriuth..." Luke mumbled. "But is something like that possible, or did he just make that up to fool me?"

"A hyperresonance will decompose anything into the fonons that makes it up," Asch explained. "In theory it should be possible."

"In theory, yes," Jade adjusted his glasses, the faint light catching them and creating an eerie glare. "However, there are more than a few problems with such a plan. Controlling a hyperresonance on such a large scale to that degree would be impossible, it would take nothing but a single mistake and you would die."
"Then I'll do it," Asch stated.

"It doesn't matter if it's the original or the replica, neither of you can create a hyperresonance that powerful, forget one that you'd be able to survive," Jade continued.

"What if you had something to amplify the power and to reduce the strain on the user's body?" Asch asked.


"The Sword of Lorelei has the ability to gather fonons. It could be used to gather the Seventh Fonons and amplify the hyperresonance so it won't be as strenuous," Asch explained.

"You don't know when to give up do you?" Jade cocked an eyebrow disapprovingly.

"No," Asch shot back with determination.

"Well then, if you insist, to gather the amount of fonons necessary, you'll need to kill around ten thousand Seventh Fonists, or at least potential Seventh Fonists. The recoil of the hyperresonance would cause fonon separation and would kill the user as well. You can eliminate the miasma at the cost of ten thousand innocent lives, and one guilty one. Some would say that's quite a cheap price versus the lives of the rest of the world."

"No way!" Luke protested. "That's impossible! We can't just kill ten thousand people!"

"Exactly," Jade stated. "Which is why I said it wouldn't work."

"Damn, I really thought we'd had something there," Luke muttered.

'What do you think?' Luke prodded his sibling who was still lost in thought.

'There has to be some way to make it work, without killing all the innocent people,' Asch replied.

'But you heard Jade; it would kill whichever one of us tried to do it!'

'But what if we'd freed Lorelei? Lorelei is the single biggest mass of Seventh Fonons in existence. If we could get his help, gathering the necessary fonons wouldn't be a problem at all. Maybe if the fonons weren't so difficult to gather, then the strain on the user would be less too.'

'Either way, it all comes down to stopping Master Van and freeing Lorelei,' Luke replied, his tone thoughtful, pondering the possibilities his sibling had presented. 'For now, let's just drop it until we've freed Lorelei and stopped Master Van.'

'Yeah...' Asch agreed.

The entrance to the cathedral was unusually quiet, the tension kept at its maximum by the plethora of multicoloured guards that stood around. Everyone sat quietly, almost worried that if they said anything, half the guards in the room would pounce, not because they were an enemy, but just because that's how up-tight everyone was. Anise was beginning to remember why they hadn't hung around in the first place. If she had to sit here for another two days... she was seriously going to lose her mind.

Natalia stifled a giggle as Anise shuffled impatiently. Her puffed cheeks and pouty expression were clear signs that her already tried patience was clearly running thin. Somehow, though, Natalia suspected that the summit had little to do with it. She could relate to some extent, after all, if she'd
been forced to wait a full month before getting the chance to see Asch, she would be impatient as well. And Ion was dear to the former Fon Master Guardian, whether either of them realized it or not.

Though it was unlikely for the sake of Anise's sanity, the summit officially concluded just over an hour later. Natalia was glad to see her father and Peony in what seemed like good spirits; that was certainly a good sign. At least they'd come to an agreement, now if only the results were as good as their smiles suggested.

"Hey guys," Peony waved at the group. "Have you been waiting here this whole time?"

"No," Luke replied. "But there was some trouble with the God-Generals out in the city, so we figured it would be best if we stayed around here."

"Nothing serious, I hope."

"We think that they may have been trying to interrupt the summit," Tear provided. "But we drove them from the city."

"I realize that you haven't officially announced the decisions made at the summit yet, but..." Natalia began. Peony's laughter drowned her out as she trailed off. Natalia blushed, she realized she was being as impatient about this as Anise was about seeing Ion, but the results had a great deal of impact on their future actions.

"No, we'll fill you in, besides, we need some information from you as well," Ingobert provided.

"The Seventh Fonstone," Jade guessed.

"Yes," the Kimlascan King said with a nod.

"We decided that we won't be announcing that we have it, at least for now," Peony explained. "Of course, we're not going to use it either. It's useless now that we've deviated from it, but we still feel it should be guarded in case Mohs attempts to reclaim it or some travelling Scorer happens to come across it. It's not that we don't trust your hiding skills, but it would give us both some peace of mind."

"That sounds fair enough," Tear commented. "I don't doubt Mohs will be looking, and a joint operation will ensure the fairness between the countries. Have you given any thought to who will guard them?"

"I'm assigning General Frings and some of his men," Peony stated. "He's one of my most trusted men, unless you plan on lending me this old thing." The Emperor smirked and nodded in Jade's direction.

"I think we're still going to need that one for awhile," Asch tossed back.

"Father, who will be going on behalf of Kimlasca?"

"I haven't decided, but I may ask General Cecille and her men."

"Well once you've both decided, Noelle can pick them up and drop them off at the proper location," Asch stated.

"Now just wait a second, I realize you guys may want to keep the location a secret and all but-"
"Your Majesty must realize this isn't the best place for such discussions," Jade cut Peony off. "They will simply have to occur at a later date."

"I guess you're right," the Malkuth Emperor admitted sheepishly, noticing the sudden interest all the guards had taken in them. Confidentiality only went so far and it likely wouldn't be long before whispers of the Seventh Fonstone began to resound in the hallways. Keeping it to just that was the best they could hope for.

"I take it this means you intend to stand against Mohs and his New Order?" Jade inquired.

"Yes," Ingobert confirmed. "We can't allow him to continue to spread such lies and chaos among the people."

"Well you were in there forever, but you managed to get quite a bit done, didn't you?" Anise asked.

"We managed to settle all the issues we set out to," Peony replied.

"Unfortunately, neither of us were able to devise a solution to the miasma," Ingobert admitted. "For now, we'll both devote our greatest minds to the problem, but it doesn't look like there will be any results for some time. Research is all we're able to do at this point."

"Yulia City will focus its attention on this matter as well," Teodoro added.

"We'll see if we can come up with something too," Asch offered.

"For now that is the only issue that has not been immediately resolved. We'll continue to work towards a solution together."

"It's getting pretty late," Anise commented. Out the windows, the sky was several shades of orange and red.

"I think it best that we, at least, stay the night," Jade stated. "We can figure out our next course of action on a good night's sleep."

"I wouldn't mind heading out tonight if Noelle is cool with it," Peony stated. "It's a bit of a trip back home for all three of us."

"No problem!" Noelle agreed. The perky young pilot had joined them not long after the summit had finished, likely summoned by one of the guards who was instructed to do so when the monarchs were done.

"Then we shall part ways for the time being," Jade said with a short bow towards Peony.

"And none too soon I bet." The Emperor elbowed Jade in the side. With a mischievous wink back at them, the blond monarch followed King Ingobert and Teodoro out of the cathedral. No one said a word as a good deal of chaos ensued in the entrance while the guards all attempted to re-organize themselves, the Oracle Knights resuming their usual posts and the Malkuth and Kimlascan soldiers reuniting with their respective squads before moving out.

"What a day," Anise finally said with a sigh of relief.

"Yeah," Asch agreed. "I'm ready to call it a night."

"You look like you could use it," Anise shot. Asch glared at her. "Hey! What? You think you can stay up until all hours of the morning and not have you and your other half showing it?"
Asch looked curiously over at Luke who was speaking with Guy and Tear. He did look tired, but why? Luke had had more than ample amount of sleep over the past couple weeks. Was it really Asch's own weariness he was showing? Asch shook his head. True they shared their connection, but to be physically affected by each other... that seemed a bit much, and more than he could remember ever experiencing before. It wasn't like if one of them got hurt, they both felt the pain... so why should this be any different? He'd never felt Luke's lack of sleep or noticed Luke feeling his before... what had changed? Maybe... No. Asch shook off the thought right there. He'd think about it in the morning, he just didn't have the energy to right now.

First he would sleep, and then he could return to the worries of the world.

"After the earthquake, they all just left. They didn't want to attack me because I was a replica like they were," Luke explained. "It kind of makes me sad; I wish they didn't think of originals and replicas as such different people."

"Yes, such thinking is quite unfortunate. But the fact that they acknowledged you is perhaps a step in the proper direction," Ion replied with a smile that did far less to hid his weariness than Luke suspected he thought it did.

It was late. The soft light of the fonstone lamp created dancing shadows, chasing the night from the walls of the Fon Master's chambers. Luke knew it was way past the time either of them should be up, especially given the fact Ion was still recovering... but he had really wanted to talk to him and since the summit was over, he could finally actually come visit. Luke had anticipated a bit of trouble getting here, but everything had gone smoothly and the guard had let him right through. Surprising, as Luke fully recalled the small fury Anise had been in when she found out that Arietta had given orders that she wasn't to be allowed up to see Ion. The former Fon Master Guardian had immediately stormed off to find Tritheim and get the orders withdrawn, but she wouldn't likely get in until the morning. Luke would have come earlier... but he didn't want to fathom what would happen if Anise found out he was free to go up when she wasn't, so he'd waited until he was sure she had turned in for the night.

Thankfully, Ion had still been awake, and Luke had found him staring aimlessly out the window. He'd offered to return tomorrow if Ion was tired, but the young Fon Master denied it and was truly glad that Luke had come to visit.

Despite his words, Ion did look tired and while Luke had offered to leave more than once in the past couple hours they'd spent catching up, Ion insisted that he stay... pleaded almost. Luke felt bad, even with Arietta around, his friend must be lonely spending all this time by himself.

Ion was propped up against several pillows that were in more than excess on the small single bed. Several empty bowls of stew were to be found on the lone night stand and the young Fon Master struggled under the weight of all the blankets he'd been brought.

In the corner of the room where the mirror once was, a table had been erected, and on it was a vase filled with several bouquets of flowers, one from Arietta herself, and a few others the former God-General had picked as being worthy of being in Ion's room. She certainly was going all out and while her efforts left Ion somewhat flustered, Luke could tell he was enjoying her company. It was good for him to have at least one person around to talk to, especially since they couldn't afford to be there for him.

"So Van has raised the beginnings of his replica world?" Ion asked.

"Yeah, apparently it's a replica of Hod that he's building," Luke continued. "He's been using Mohs
as a diversion so the world wouldn't notice what he was up to. Its working too; we're all so busy
dealing with the mess Mohs made, almost nothing has been done about it."

"But you've made such wonderful progress," Ion said with a smile. "You've slowed the fonon
consumption, secured the Seventh Fonstone so Mohs can't use it and you've manage to mediate an
agreement between the countries. You should be proud of what you've done."


"If I may ask, how is Tear doing these days?"

"She's been great. You'd never know she had ever been sick."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"How have you been?"

"As well as could be expected," Ion answered, which wasn't really much of an answer at all. "I just
wish there was more I could have done for you."

Luke watched Ion, his smile, his warm green eyes, everything seemed fine, but there was a feeling
in the pit of Luke's stomach that he just couldn't shake. Ion claimed to be alright, all the doctors
said that he was on the mend, but why was he so pale? It had been almost a month, Ion had plenty
of time to rest up, and yet he seemed so weak. The pillows behind him were the only thing keeping
him upright and as much as he was trying to hide his dependence on their support, it came across
clear as day. Luke wanted to ignore it, he had been, the whole time they had been speaking... but
there was no denying just how lifeless Ion looked. It was stupid; there was no reason for things not
to be fine! So then why did Luke's gut tell him that something was very wrong?

"You shouldn't worry so much," Luke finally managed, trying to keep a smile on his face. "You'll
be better in no time; then you can do whatever it is you want to do."

"Yes, well-" Ion's comment was cut off by a sudden violent fit of coughing. Luke hurried to his
side, propping his friend up when he otherwise would have fallen from his bed. Ion's trembling
hand covered his mouth doing nothing but spur on Luke's racing heart. Just what was wrong? Ion
was coughing so hard he could barely get any air in, and each rale brought with it a shade of white
that cloaked Ion's face.

"I-It's alright-" Ion finally managed pushing Luke away. "I'm fine."

"N-No you're not fine!" Luke protested. Where Ion had pushed himself up, he'd left a red handprint
on Luke's white jacket. "You're coughing up blood!" Ion closed his fist, but was unable to hide the
red that stained it.

"I guess there's no keeping it from you, is there?" Ion asked softly, not expecting an answer. "What
you said... it isn't true. I'm... I will not be getting better."

It hit Luke then, like a concrete slab to the chest and suddenly the Fon Master wasn't the only one
who was having trouble breathing. Ion's weariness had nothing to do with the late hour, the
paleness, the reluctance to say more than a few words about himself, the now piercing feeling that
distorted Luke's stomach... the blood... all of it lined up in a neat little row and one of Luke's hands
came up to cover his mouth shaking harder than he thought possible. Ion saw the sudden
realization in his eyes.

"No- don't talk like that!" Luke bit his lip, not realizing he'd yelled. "The doctors said you'll be just
"I apologize," Ion said with a sad smile. His eyes never left the bedding in front of him, red smearing the white sheets he clutched tightly in his fist. "I told them to tell... to tell you that. I haven't let them tell anyone the truth."

Luke choked back the lump rising in his throat but it was futile; it slipped back for no more than a second before rising again. It was a lie, this wasn't real... he was trapped in some kind of twisted nightmare... anything! Ion was just tired; it was late right? That was it. All this time, the little things that seemed off, his weakness, it was all just because Luke was keeping him up late... This couldn't be... no it wasn't happening! But even as Luke denied it, he could see his friend before him, how every word from Ion's mouth left him breathless. It couldn't... Ion would never actually- actually-

"I know it's selfish of me," Ion began again once he'd recovered a bit, still trying to regain his breath from his previous coughing fit. "But... I just couldn't bear the thought of the look on everyone's faces if they knew. I want them to be happy... to smile with me in whatever time I have left. Perhaps it's my last selfish request..."

"How..." Luke fought back the tears that burned behind his eyes. "How..." Luke cleared his throat, summoning all the courage he could manage from his breaking soul. "How can you be like that? How can you be so strong?"

"Luke, I'm happy with how things turned out. I'm glad that I was able to meet you, and meet everyone else. I never dreamed I would ever have any friends, much less all of you. If it weren't for you... I would have gone through life never realizing what it meant to be alive." Ion paused to catch his breath. "I'm glad I was able to save Tear... given the choice, I would do it all again."

"Ion..." Luke sat himself down on the bed next to his treasured friend. Ion finally looked him in the eye.

"I feel that being able to help you and to save Tear was the true reason for which I was created... so please don't be sad..." Ion's shining eyes overflowed, dropping tears gently on the stained sheets still wrapped up in his clasp.

"But even you're crying," Luke pointed out, his voice quivering.

Ion reached up, fingering the strange streams that fell from his cheeks. "How strange... I'm... I..."

Luke reached over and took Ion in his arms, holding him, trying to hold in the warmth that slowly seemed to escape him. The tainted fonons were there... they were so much worse now that the miasma had come back. There were just so many and they were sapping his warmth, his strength. They were killing him...

"Thank you Luke... thank you for being my friend... and for always looking out for me..."

Luke couldn't find the words to reply so he held Ion tighter, biting his lip until it bled. He wouldn't cry; he refused. It was what Ion wanted... he wanted his last memories to be happy, to be of his friends smiling. So no matter how much Luke felt he was dying inside, no matter how many icy cold ropes tied themselves around his heart and tightened around his throat, he wouldn't cry. Even though something within him was telling him, like it was telling Ion, that the young Fon Master's time had almost run out. He... he wouldn't...

Separating himself from Luke, Ion had to let his friend help him back onto the pillows. Ion rolled over, and reaching under one of his many pillows, he pulled something out.
"What is this?" Luke asked when Ion placed the small stone in his hand.

"It's a fonstone..." Ion explained, his eyes starting to droop, weakness setting in; but Ion fought against it with every bit of will he had left. "I know that it... means very little but... it's a Score I wanted to read to you. But now... I don't have the strength left anymore. You should be able to read it yourself..."

"I can't! I don't know how to read the Score."

"You can use the Seventh Fonon," Ion managed. "I believe in you; I know you can figure it out."

"I'll come back in the morning, then you can explain to me how to do it," Luke tried, but Ion weakly shook his head. "Why... why not?"

"You can feel it too, can't you?"

"No... No! I don't feel anything! I don't-t-" Ion put a trembling finger to Luke's lips.

"I'm glad... you came to see me, I was so worried... I wouldn't get to see you again before..."

Luke still shook his head. He refused- he wouldn't acknowledge it! He wouldn't listen to that feeling in his gut that told him he wouldn't see Ion again.

"Come here," Ion said softly, his voice barely a whisper. Luke leaned in and Ion moved closer whispering a message in the young noble's ear.


"Can... Can you?"

"Yeah... I'll make sure," Luke agreed.

"Thank you... Luke..."

"Ion... I'm- I'm so sorry!" Luke's voice broke.

"No... don't... be sorry."

"I- I couldn't-"

"I think... it's time for you to get some sleep."

"No! I-"

"Sunrises are beautiful... aren't they?" Ion commented, cutting Luke off. "I've always... enjoyed them... because each one brings with it a new day... full of new opportunities. But to get to a sunrise, you have to endure the night. It's... it's gotten very late..."

Luke nodded slowly, holding Ion tightly. He didn't want to leave; he wanted to freeze this moment in time forever. There just couldn't be a world without Ion, where his friend didn't exist. A world without his smile, his light... there just couldn't!

"It's late..." Ion whispered into Luke's ear. Luke nodded but made no motion to move.

"I don't want to go," Luke said weakly.
"You have to."

Luke slowly began to let go, but as he did, Ion pulled him closer one last time. "Please... enjoy... the sunrise for me."

Luke choked back the lump in his throat. He was going to be sick, if whatever was stabbing his heart didn't kill him first. His soul shattered and it took all the strength Luke had ever known to stop in that doorway, choke back the tears, and smile at his dying friend.

"Good- good night... Ion."

"Good night Luke..." the Fon Master smiled, sinking back into his covers, the last of the colour fleeing from his face as Luke turned and left his room.

Goodbye, my dearest friend.

Tear stifled a small yawn as she stood in the entrance to Daath's great cathedral. It was unusually quiet, even with it being so early in the morning; but most people probably hadn't realized the summit was over, so it didn't cause any particular kind of concern. For all that the Colonel had implied they'd get a good night's sleep, he certainly wanted them up early enough. He probably just wanted to have some idea of what direction they'd be heading in, or at least wanted to get started on it. Well whatever his reasoning, he wasn't going to be sharing.

Natalia stood nearby, also rubbing the sleep from her eyes, but looking remarkably awake for all the tossing and turning she'd done the night before. Tear smiled in amusement, she was like a child on Christmas after that summit, and Tear had listened to her excited chatter well into the night. Natalia was definitely meant to be a Princess.

"Good morning, Guy," Natalia greeted the Malkuth noble who walked in from the eastern wing.

"Where are the others?" Jade inquired.

"Asch went to wake Luke up," the blond provided. "I guess he was up late, not sure why though."

"Well regardless, that still leaves us with one member unaccounted for," the Colonel pointed out.

"Where is Anise, anyways?" Natalia wondered. "She was up and out the door well before Tear and I had gotten out of bed. She should have been here already."

"I think she was planning to go see Ion before we left," Tear tossed in.

"Yes, but surely it wouldn't take her quite this long."

"I wouldn't worry, you know how she gets when she's around Ion," Guy said with a shrug.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Natalia replied. "Still, with Cantabile showing up yesterday and her mention of returning... I'm concerned."

"Well then, we have some time before Luke and Asch will be down, why don't we go check on her?" Guy suggested.

"It wouldn't hurt," Natalia agreed. "Besides, she can talk with Ion almost as long as Tear can speak with Luke."

"Wh-what?" Tear flushed, unsure exactly what her companions were implying with the way they
were suddenly staring at her.

"We should say good-bye to Ion as well," Natalia extended her hand towards Tear. "After all, it's been a long time since we've had the chance to speak with him."

"Yes," Tear agreed. "I still haven't properly thanked him for helping me."

"I'm sure he knows you're grateful."

"Still, I owe it to him to express that gratitude," Tear argued.

"Then let's catch up to the others," Natalia replied with a smile.

"Yes," the melodist returned the smile, but it quickly faded, her hand coming to rest uncertainly on her chest. She owed Ion so much more than a 'thank you'... but for now, it was all she had to offer. She'd find a proper way of thanking him someday.

The sheets of his bed were still cold, untouched by the stray rays of sunshine that were peaking over the windowsill. Luke lay in a daze, staring at the opposite wall, unsure if he'd slept, unsure if this was even the reality in which he belonged. Time had no meaning, it wouldn't go on anyways. Not... not without... Numbness swallowed him, his mind and his thoughts were as frozen as his heart; shock perhaps or maybe it was denial. Luke couldn't even tell if he was breathing.

Warmth, small but penetrating radiated from the fonstone still tightly held in his grip. It was reality, a small piece of it. Something that was real, that registered in the tundra that was his mind. What was he supposed to do? What was he even doing here? How could, how could everything just go on, how could the sun rise again when...

A single ray of light landed on the pillow before him.

Luke rolled over, his eyes gazing out the window. On the horizon, gold painted the sky, its colours piercing through the miasma that would have normally stolen its beauty. Clouds were sprayed silver in the golden sky, and the sun crept ever so slightly up over the horizon, bringing with it a myriad of colours, painting the world below.

The light choked him, piercing Luke's timeless world. The numbness faded, but in its place a weight Luke had never thought possible crashed down. His lungs constricted, stomach roiled and whatever strength he had found the night before evaporated like the dew that covered the grass. With his heart in his throat, Luke couldn't fight the water that burned behind his eyes anymore. He buried his head in his pillow and cried.

But when his chest finally loosened and his endless sobs began to abate, he looked back out the window. It was the most dazzling sunrise he'd ever seen. The light spread out over the horizon, breaking the navies and painting the sky an almost silver hue that would soon fade to blue. Birds in the trees began to chirp, welcoming the morning and praising its allurements, drawing life back to the world... It was a new day, a new beginning. The previous day was still being mourned and the scars left behind may never heal; but with the new day came new chances and the hope that allowed people to continue forward.

Time would keep moving.

_Can you see it... Ion?_
Asch only knocked once, opening the door to the room he shared with Guy and his sibling before getting any kind of answer. The eldest redhead brought a hand up to shield his eyes from the sun that shone through the window, momentarily blinding him before he moved from its path. Luke still lay in bed, facing away from the door Asch had walked in, with his blankets pulled all the way up over his shoulders. Asch sighed; he wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but really. He wasn't even out of bed yet? Luke was nowhere near ready to get going.

"Up and at 'em lazy," Asch shot teasingly. "If you don't get up soon Jade's going to leave without you." Fully expecting some sort of jibe in return, Asch was surprised when nothing came. In fact, Luke didn't even budge and being so completely ignored vaguely annoyed the older sibling.

"Seriously," the older sibling tried again. "Everyone's waiting for us; it's time to get up. We're late as it is." Still no reaction; a mischievous grin spread across his face. It had been years since he'd had to resort to using water...

The thought was tempting, and in fact had it been any other instance he probably would have walked right back out that door and found himself a pail of cold water, but something, and even Asch couldn't quite figure out what, stopped him. There was a small nagging, an inkling at the back of his mind that was bothering him... something that just wasn't quite right. With a defeated sigh, he walked around and sat himself down on the bed.

"Luke-" the young monarch cut himself off when Luke quickly turned, burying his face in his pillow in attempt to hide his swollen red eyes and the tears that still lingered. He wasn't quite quick enough; regardless, his actions alone betrayed what he was trying to hide. "Luke... what's the matter? What's wrong?" A sudden flicker of panic lit within Asch, searing away the trivial annoyance he'd been feeling. As soon as he'd seen it, the little thorn turned into an all consuming presentiment. Something was wrong.

Luke didn't offer any kind of answer, which only spurred on Asch's concerns. He placed a hand gently on his little brother's back; Luke shuffled, bringing one of his arms up to wipe his eyes, still with his head buried in the white cotton pillowcase. Asch's mind started racing. Just what was going on? What had Luke so upset? Was he having nightmares again? That didn't seem right... it wasn't like he'd been paying any special attention, but somehow, Asch just knew that it wasn't the case. But even if it was nightmares... what had happened to cause them? Other than their encounter with Cantabile, nothing that could be remotely considered "bad" had happened in the past few weeks, so why now? Asch sat there; finding himself comfortingly rubbing Luke's back, trying to discover an answer he wasn't going to find. He had to know...

Reaching across their connection, Asch was surprised to meet resistance. One of Luke's green eyes looked up at him, dry now... but with a fearful light still shining within it. The younger sibling softly shook his head. Asch's presence was a threat, trivial as it had become, it would take no more than that to break down the barrier Luke erected and loose whatever pain he'd sealed away upon him. Luke looked up at his brother, crying for help, but in the same gaze begging Asch not to pry any further. He couldn't share this, he'd promised. Yet, if Asch forced his way in, Luke would fold; they both knew it... because he didn't have the strength anymore.

Asch opened his mouth to say something, but before he could contemplate what he could possibly say, the door of the room flew open. The ensuing smash of the doorknob against the wall made Asch jump; next to him, Luke remained buried beneath his covers, completely disconnected from the world around him.
"What's the matter?" Asch demanded, the flicker of panic igniting at the sight of the frantic expressions on his friends as they rushed into the room. "What's going on?" Suddenly they all froze; no one wanted to be the first to say anything.

"Anise is missing," Guy stated after a moment. "And- and..."

"And?"

"They're saying... that Ion passed away last night," he finally managed.

"What?" Asch's eyes widened in shock but they immediately flew towards Luke, everything suddenly falling into place.

He knew.

"Wh- But how?" Asch stuttered, complete disbelief crashing over him. He stood up from the bed, walking over towards the door where everyone was standing. "Wasn't he getting better? Or was this...?" He allowed himself to trail off, trying to keep the implications of his words from Luke.

Tear shook her head. "It seems that Ion had the doctors lie to us," she said meekly. "He wasn't well at all; he was on his deathbed this whole time."

"He had been recovering at first," Jade filled in when Tear seemed unable to continue. "But he took a turn for the worse some weeks ago and they were unable to do anything for him."

"Have you seen him?" Asch asked.

"No," Guy answered. "They wouldn't let us past. We spoke with the doctor that had been called and he gave us the story."

Asch pondered what he'd been told for a moment, allowing it all to sink in. Ion had died... somehow it didn't quite seem real, but the state he'd found Luke in left him more inclined to believe the story his friends relayed. Still... how did Luke know?

"Something about this seems fishy," Asch finally stated. "He was sick... but for it to get this bad? Maybe we should go see for ourselves. After Cantabile showed up yesterday, and the timing with Daath and the countries just having decided to stand against Mohs... I'm worried this isn't exactly what it seems."

"Yes, we should ascertain whether or not foul play was involved," Jade agreed.

"Maestro Tritheim could give us permission to go see him," Tear provided. Her voice was hard and cold, more formal than Asch had heard her use in a long time. She was trying her hardest to keep face. Asch nodded, sending her as much gratitude as he could muster amidst the muddled mess his thoughts had become. No one knew what to think right now, but there was one thing of which Asch was sure.

"Luke, you should stay-" Asch turned around and was so surprised to see Luke standing behind him that the remainder of his request was lost to the morning air. Luke was still wearing the clothes he'd had on yesterday except for the jacket that had vanished somewhere; he must have slept in them. He didn't say a word, Asch suspected it was because he didn't trust himself to say anything and maintain whatever strength he'd built up; but his eyes made it clear that he was coming too.

Asch didn't know how much he liked the idea of Luke coming. There was no saying what state they'd find Ion in, and Luke was shaken as it was. If things turned out to be as he feared, there
really was no saying if Luke would be able to recover. As if sensing his thoughts, Luke sent him a weak look that was supposed to be determined, but came across more pleading than anything else. Asch managed a small smile that he was sure was filled with all the pity he was trying not to show. With Luke it was just impossible, after all, he could feel how much Luke was hurting inside. The strength that it must have taken him to stay calm, to keep that straight face on even as everyone continued to discuss the repercussion of Ion's death behind him, Asch just couldn't shoot all that effort down. Luke felt he owed it to Ion, it wasn't his place.

"Okay, you can come too," Asch conceded. Luke nodded softly and followed his friends out the door. Asch placed his arm around Luke's shoulder and frowned when he felt his little brother sink into it. This would be a harsh test... for all of them.

Security around Ion's room was unbelievably tight; guards stood every few feet along the halls, crowding the narrow corridors of the cathedral's upper levels. Only Maestro Tritheim's permission allowed them up here, making the heavy atmosphere all the more stifling. Ion's office was completely empty, the furniture untouched in what seemed like ages, layers of dust betraying the Fon Master's recent inactivity. It was dead silent up here; Asch didn't find the pun amusing.

It wasn't until they saw him that Asch realized just how much colour Ion had always possessed. The young monarch had always thought of Ion as unhealthily pale, but seeing him white and completely devoid of colour, he retracted every statement he'd ever made. The Fon Master still lay in his bed, looking to the world like he was sleeping. Asch hesitantly reached over, and brushed a few stray hairs from Ion's forehead. A frown spread across his face and a small pit started to grow in his stomach. Ion was cold, yet... he somehow looked peaceful. All of Asch's theories crumbled before what he'd swear was a gentle smile on their friend's face.

"It doesn't seem like there was any suspicious activity involved," Jade finally commented, having come over to inspect the young boy himself. His voice broke through the silence but did nothing to lift the indissoluble tension that flooded the room. "It looks as if he died in his sleep."

"So it really was because he was sick..." Tear said.

"Don't blame yourself Tear," Guy intervened, knowing full well what that tone in her voice meant. "It has nothing to do with you."

"Doesn't it? He got sick because he had been weak from healing me."

"No," Jade interrupted. "Perhaps that might be the case, but he was recovering," the Necromancer pointed out. "Though the fact that he fell ill in the first place may be partially attributed to his decision to use a Daathic Fonic Arte to heal you, it would have taken something else to allow it to get this bad." Jade picked up a discarded handkerchief and unfolded it, revealing a cleverly hidden smear of blood. "It looks like the pneumonia had set deep within his lungs. No doubt it eventually started to attack his heart."

"That must have been awful," Tear commented, bringing a hand to her mouth as she noticed how many handkerchiefs lay discarded around his bed. Knowing what to look for made the evidence all the more obvious, and the previously masked red smears on the sheets and pillows suddenly stood out like small fires on a moonless night.

A sob escaped Natalia and Tear placed an arm comfortably around her shoulders. Natalia gratefully accepted the gesture, her emotions becoming all the more difficult to control with the presence of Tear as a support. Of all people, Ion didn't deserve this. Not that anyone truly did, but for someone so kind and so innocent to have suffered such a great deal, all in silence. It just seemed
so cruel. Natalia wiped her eyes, she had to try and keep herself together, for Luke's sake if for no one else's. He would take this the hardest.

"Master... are you okay?"

Mieu's small voice drew Asch's attention and Luke's absence suddenly hit him. His eyes darted around the small chamber. Where was- But Asch hadn't even completed the worried thought when he spotted the small cheagle and next to him was his little brother; Luke hadn't even made it into the room.

Luke had collapsed onto his knees in front of a tray that was sitting in the doorway. Asch hadn't even noticed it before; they'd all just stepped over it without giving it a second thought. Several shattered dishes still sat on the small tray, pieces of glass escaping its confines to the floor around it. The food had all mixed together, covered by the orange juice that had once sat in the broken glass. Luke's eyes were wide in shock and his arms were shaking, hovering above the tray as if he were about to pick it up.

The narrow door was the only thing that kept Asch from going to Luke's side, even though he knew there was little he could offer. From the corner of his eye, he saw Guy going through the same thought process. Asch tried across their connection again, surprised to find no form of resistance this time. His frown only deepened; Luke's mind was completely empty, shut down and unable to process any kind of thought. He was in shock. Complete and utter shock, perhaps even the beginnings of denial... and Asch wondered what and how much Luke had really known this morning. Had Luke known how sick Ion really was? Was that why he'd been so upset? Still, even knowing, it didn't dull the pain in the least. The sudden news of his death... it was still a harsh blow.

"I wonder who was the unfortunate one to find him this morning," Jade commented, noticing the tray that had caught Asch's attention. With the lies Ion had the doctors tell, it was no surprise it had caught whomever it was off guard.

"Guys..." Guy finally spoke up. "Anise is still missing. Do you think she knows what happened?"

"Wait... she was coming up here to see Ion this morning," Natalia suddenly realized. "She must have seen him..." the Princess couldn't finish her sentence.

"I'm sorry," an older woman interrupted. She looked like someone who worked here at the cathedral, and had been sent, no doubt, to begin the morbid duty of cleaning up Ion's quarters while proper arrangements were made. "But do you mean Anise Tatlin, his former Guardian?"

"Yes..." Asch provided.

"It's just that I saw her earlier this morning, it seems she took off after Lady Arietta."

"We have to go after her," Guy stated.

"Yeah," Asch agreed, earning a nod from the others. "She can't have gotten far."

"Come on Luke," Asch said softly, helping his sibling to his feet. He managed to get a half-hearted nod from Luke and the younger redhead followed behind his friends in a daze. Asch choked back the pit that had sprouted into a vine, wrapping itself very finely around his neck. They'd lost Ion... and if this kept up, he didn't know if Luke would ever come out of it either. The hollowing emptiness that echoed from his little brother's mind weighed on him adding to his own emotions. They needed to find Anise... then... then they would have to find a way to start dealing with things.
For the world that Ion had wanted to build... and for themselves so that they could protect it with all the will he had passed on to them.

Anise wasn't anywhere to be found within the cathedral. Thankfully, more than one person had seen her and Arietta bolt from Ion's quarters what they had established wasn't any more than an hour ago. Thanks to everyone's help, the search wasn't drawn out, and no one was quite sure whether they should be grateful or not. Jade stopped only once, a brief discussion with one of the physicians, clarifying a few points that none of them understood. Between, that and the short jaunt from Ion's room to the entrance everyone had a brief moment to collect their thoughts, though it wasn't nearly long enough. Unfortunately, they were going to need every second of it. Natalia and her companions passed through the cathedral's massive doors, and no sooner had they stepped outside, did their search end.

Ligers snarled as the group approached, snapping at their attempts to pass by, but making no offensive moves otherwise. At the bottom of the stairs, a similar group of ligers stood, though none of the citizens seemed intent on trying to get by and instead warily went about their way. The message was clear... no one was allowed to pass. But what was the cause of such peculiar behaviour? A ferocious roar drew Natalia's attention to the answer.

Arietta sat on the back of a massive yellow liger, the same one they'd seen accompanying her on Feres Isle. The once pristine white mane was stained red and Arietta hadn't been entirely spared the injuries her loyal companion had. With a second fierce roar, the liger lunged its claws reaching out and the sound of Anise's cry filled the air. A whelp; Tokunaga caught the liger in the stomach, knocking the air from its lungs and flinging it into the air. In spite of its injuries, the liger oriented itself and landed cleanly on its feet.

"I'll never forgive you!" Anise yelled, hysteria already evident in her normally confident voice. She didn't seem outwardly as dishevelled as her opponent, but a closer look revealed almost as many injuries. How long had the two of them been fighting like this? And why the barrier of ligers? They weren't... this couldn't be... a duel?

"How could you! How could you have killed Ion?" Anise charged forward, lunging at the former God-General, the sharp tip of her mace missed and Arietta's arte caught her full force, knocking her from her doll.

"I never killed him!" Arietta yelled back. "He died because of you! Because you didn't take care of him!" She struck but Anise dodged the hit and went for a strike of her own. Arietta's blood added another stain to her liger's mane, but her bleeding arm meant little in the face of the opponent she was set on destroying.

"Stop this! You've got to stop!" Like snapping out of a daze, Luke suddenly ran forward, stumbling over himself as he yelled, his voice frantic and bordering hysterical. One of the ligers stepped in his way and growled. No one was allowed to interfere. Luke shook his head in disbelief, and Asch readied himself in case Luke tried to break past. He was in no condition to be fighting anything. Thankfully, Luke seemed to accept the barrier Arietta's monsters had created, but that didn't deter him in the least.

"Don't you dare try to stop me!" Anise seethed in the most venomous tone any of them had ever heard her use. "I'll never let her get away with what she did. After everything..."

"Anise, Ion was sick!" Luke yelled. "He died because he was sick! He died because... because... he died..." Luke fell to his knees.
"He died because of Arietta! The doctors even said it! He was getting better!" Anise screamed. "Then he suddenly started getting worse, right around the time Arietta came back to take care of him." No one missed the vehemence Anise put into her words, her eyes watering with rage as her gloved fists trembled. "She poisoned him! After all that stuff she said... she still followed orders! She said- she said she'd protect Ion, and she killed him!"

"I'm not you, Anise!" Arietta screamed back, her own eyes equally wet with anger and the emotions she rode were far more powerful than the liger's back on which she sat. "I'm not some petty slave to Mohs! This is all your fault! If you had taken care of him- if you had been protecting him instead of being a spy and a traitor and putting him in all those situations, then he wouldn't have gotten that weak and hurt! If I'd stayed his guardian, I would have protected him! He never would have ended up like this!"

Anise skirted around Arietta's arte and unleashed one of her own. The former God-General wasn't fazed by the assault and easily evaded it, countering with a rampant flurry of claws and teeth that tore through Anise's defence. Both girls were possessed with grief. They were completely beyond themselves.

"No one ever cared about me!" Arietta continued as she locked herself in close-hand combat with Anise and Tokunaga. "Nobody! Nobody wanted me! The only person I ever had was Ion! He was the only one who looked after me, and cared about me... Now- now because of you he's gone! I will never forgive you for taking him away from me! Ever!"

"Stop! You have to... you have to stop!" Luke screamed hysterically, but his heart-wrenching cries fell on ears deafened by loss and only everyone else who watched on felt their hearts ripped from their chests. Jade stepped forward, and placed a hand on Luke's shoulder. "Please Jade... make them stop..." he brokenly pleaded.

Jade shook his head. "Don't. They're both beyond the point where logic can settle this. This is something they feel they must do, for the person that they've lost."

"No... no they can't! They-" Luke couldn't continue, the words tearing at his dry throat in his desperation to say something... anything! Something to make them stop! Before they really hurt each other... or- or- This wasn't what Ion had wanted! Ion didn't want this; he never would have wanted them to fight like this. All he had wanted was for them to be happy! For them to be able to smile and continue living even if he wasn't there... not this... never this... So he had to make them stop!

Anise ducked around the stone monument still yelling accusations as she launched her attacks, and was met by Arietta who was no less fierce, in either her words or her strikes. Driven by the same pain, they still found themselves on equal ground with each other. Their space was limited to the two observation platforms on which the First and Second Monuments stood and the stairs that led to the cathedral. Neither seemed to find such a restricted space a problem, nor could they successfully use it to their advantage. They weren't in a battle of strategy or planning; their fight was no more than a punching match, lashing out at the one they blamed for the loss that neither could begin to deal with. If this was going to end, either one of them had to get the other to concede the blame, or one would have to get the advantage and the other would die.

Anise rebounded off the Second Monument, launching herself at the former God-General. Arietta leapt from the back of her liger. Anise's eyes widened at the unexpected tactic, the surprise lasting only a split second before Arietta's arte caught her almost point blank. She skid across the ground, Tokunaga not far behind her. Grabbing onto her liger friend, Arietta charged, but Anise scrambled to her feet. Rolling out of the way, her mace came up, piercing the liger's leg and sending Arietta
crashing into the dirt. Anise climbed back onto Tokunaga, trying to gather her breath while Arietta recovered.

"I'll never..." Arietta managed between breaths. Her pink hair hung messily in her face, and her uniform was tattered and torn giving her a bedraggled look. None of this, however, did anything to dull the raw determination on her face. "I'll never forgive you for taking my Ion away from me."

"You don't know anything," Anise shot back maliciously.

Luke's eyes widened, the look in Anise's eyes filled him with dread. She wouldn't... she would never use something like that to- to-

"No Anise, you don't know anything!" Arietta cried as she charged forward again. Her movements had slowed with the injury of her companion, but she kept pace and was still more than a threat. "You don't know how much he cared about you, how much he believed in you! He always talked about you! And you couldn't even pay enough attention to him to realize he was sick, to see that he was weak! Instead you forced him to do things for you, things that only made him worse! If it wasn't for you- If it wasn't for you he would still be here! If it wasn't for you it would have been me he still cared about!"

"You're the one who never really cared about Ion!" Anise shouted in protest, Arietta's accusations clearly hitting home. "You say that you cared about Ion.. that you loved him..."

"Anise don't!" Luke screamed, but he could do nothing but watch on in horror.

"But you couldn't even tell you were loving the wrong person! You didn't even notice your Ion died, that you were loving a replica instead!"


"You're a liar!" Arietta yelled in outrage, her liger's claws just barely missing Anise's throat.

"The real Ion died two years ago!" Anise continued, sadistically satisfied at the confusion and pain that writhed on Arietta's face. "The Ion you killed, my Ion wasn't even the same person! If you really cared about him, you would have known the difference! You betrayed him, you betrayed him by replacing him!"

"No! That's not true! You're lying!" Arietta lashed out, her moves growing erratic and wild. "He was Ion... he cared about me too! He wasn't a replica! He couldn't be a replica!"

It was all Anise could do to dodge the flurry of attacks that ensued. Responding to its master's emotions, Arietta's liger lashed out, its attacks berserk as the monster sped out of control. Tokunaga lost an arm, and then a leg to the creature's fierce jaws.

"I'll never let you say things like that about Ion again! I'll never let you... never!" Arietta cried, but as she shook her head, the pieces continued to fall into place. Her replacement, the way Ion had changed so suddenly... the facts lined up and no matter how much she desperately tried to kick them out of place, they just fell into alignment once more. "I won't accept that! Ion does care about me! He smiled for me too! It was Ion! He couldn't be a replica!"

Luke felt as if someone had ripped a hole in his chest. The edges of this opened void seared making it next to impossible to breathe. This couldn't be happening... there had to be something, some way to make them understand... to make her understand. For Ion...

"Just because he wasn't your Ion, doesn't mean he didn't care about you too!" Luke yelled in
desperation. He just had to make her understand.

Arietta froze.

It was all the opportunity Anise needed.

The dark haired girl lunged forward, her weapon piercing Arietta's gut as the former God-General's blood-curdling scream echoed through Daath. With a swift spin, Tokunaga caught her, sending Arietta crashing into the First Monument. Her blood splattered over the dark stone, leaving a grim trail down as Arietta limply fell into the small garden at the monument's foot.

"Arietta!" Luke's raw scream sent chills up everyone's spines. He frantically broke through the confused ligers and rushed to the fallen girl's side. Luke pulled her up onto his lap, the blood soaking down through his clothes. This... this wasn't...

"Arietta," Luke spoke up in surprise, his voice echoing in the empty entranceway. The cathedral was always eerily empty at night, which only added to the surprise of seeing the former God-General there. Part of him knew she was here looking after Ion, but at the same time he was surprised to cross paths with her on his way up to visit the Fon Master.


"Well he says he's fine, but sometimes I think he isn't feeling all that well. He just says that to make me feel better."

"Yeah, that sounds like him," Luke agreed with a smile, but Arietta seemed a bit offset by his comment. Luke wished he could retract it. Apparently the original Ion wasn't like that.

"Are you going to see him?"

"Yeah, why? Would you rather I didn't?" Luke inquired. The last thing he wanted was to accidently get Arietta mad at them, things had finally settled down for her.

"No, it's fine. I think he'd like to talk to you. He always speaks about you; he keeps hoping you'll come visit soon."

"Alright, then I'll go see him. Are you off to bed?"

"No, some of the ladies in the kitchen have been teaching me how to cook. I feel bad for the way I left Ion before, and for how I did all those awful things, even when Ion asked me not to... so I'm going to make Ion breakfast in bed to make up for it!" Her eyes lit up with excitement. "I'm going to get up extra early so no one else brings him breakfast first. I'll be the first one. Maybe it will help him feel better!" Arietta said with a smile.

Luke couldn't help but return the gesture. It was the first smile... the very first genuine smile he could ever remember seeing on her. It lit up her face and for the first time, she looked happy.

"I'm sure it will."

Only the weight of Arietta's body kept Luke's arms from rattling. Blood still poured from her, covering Luke and staining the ground around them, leaving a crimson dew on broken flowers.
Luke's head continued to shake, this just- just- couldn't be... it wasn't supposed to be like this!

"Wh-where..." Arietta's voice came out quiet and meek, barely louder than a whisper. "Where is Ion?"

"He's right here with you," Luke answered through broken breaths. "Right... where he's always been."

Arietta's hand weakly reached up and Luke took it in his own, gently squeezing back when she grabbed onto it. Her hazy pink eyes met his emerald stare, and she smiled weakly.

"L-Liar..." she said, tears falling onto the flowers below. "Ion's... gone..."

Arietta's body fell limb, her hand slipping from Luke's as the last of her life fled from her. The liger she had fallen from limped over, its massive head leaning in over Luke's shoulder. With its muzzle, it nudged Arietta's head, lifting it only so it could fall limply against Luke's arm. It nudged her again, and again... but she never moved. She would never lift her head again, never open her eyes... never smile and laugh... ever again.

Luke pulled her closer, his chin rested on her head and his sobs broke the eerie silence, tears losing themselves among the strands of her blood stained pink hair.

"What are you doing Luke?" Anise spat. "She's Ion's murderer!"

"Arietta didn't kill Ion!" Luke screamed, rage burning behind his shining green eyes. The sheer vehemence in his stare made Anise instinctively step back. "She never did anything wrong!"

"Wh-What are you talking about!" Anise managed, still unnerved by Luke's reaction. The adrenaline that still coursed through her spurred her fury. What did Luke think he was doing? Ion was gone and he was crying over the person who had taken him away! Of all people! Wasn't Luke one of Ion's closest friends? He should have been helping her, not getting mad at her! "If it wasn't for Arietta, if you hadn't convinced her to come back here, Ion would still- he'd still be alive! This is all your fault, the both of you! Because of you Ion's dead!"

"Anise!" Asch snapped.

"Don't you start trying-" Anise began

"No, what Luke said is correct," Jade intervened. "Ion died because he was unable fight off his illness in his weakened state. It is highly unlikely that any sort of foul play was involved, much less anything on Arietta's part."

"You can't prove that!" Anise shouted.

"The timing of his death alone proves it," Jade replied calmly in spite of the enraged Anise, who even now continued to declare her denial with rebellious brown eyes. A single sharp glare and that condescension fell to pieces around her. "According to the doctors' evaluation of his condition and the natural progression of the disease, he wasn't expected to survive the week; in fact, they were surprised he lasted as long as he did. Had anyone, much less Arietta, been poisoning him, he would have died unusually quickly."

"He held out until the end of the summit," Natalia mumbled. "Even though he wasn't there... it's almost as if he wanted to be certain that the world would be okay..."

"No... that can't be right..." Anise mumbled to herself, shaking her head violently in denial. "Arietta
came back... and he started getting worse... I saw her in his room! It had to be her!"

"Arietta's return coincided closely with the return of the miasma," Jade pointed out. "If anything caused him to worsen, it would have been that. The weaker and the ill have been more drastically affected than anyone else."

"It seems a bit soon though, doesn't it?" Guy commented. Something about Jade's theory was off and Guy knew that there was no way Jade didn't realize this. Then again, Guy also knew this was not the time to be undermining it with Anise the way she was and he quickly dropped the subject. The blond was kneeling beside his best friend and trying to comfort Luke who still refused to let go of Arietta. She looked like a broken doll in his arms, and Guy would be the first to say that this left a bitter taste in his mouth. She may have been their enemy at one point, but she didn't deserve this, especially the way everything had played out... it just wasn't right.

"No..." Anise trembled as she sank to her knees, suddenly entranced by the blood that stained her hands and sleeves. Shock overtook her and her entire body began to shake; clenching her fists, she fought in vain against the water that burned behind her eyes. "It's not... this isn't how it's supposed to be..." she managed helplessly.

"Anise..." Natalia kneeled by her side, placing a hand gently on the young girl's shoulder. Sensing the Princess beside her, Anise collapsed into the gesture, clinging to Natalia's top and sobbing, pouring out the remains of her broken heart.

"I really did..." she sobbed. "I really did love him."

"I know you did," Natalia said softly, fighting back tears of her own as she ran her fingers through Anise's black curls.

They all felt it, even Asch, Tear, Jade and Guy, all whom had the strength to hide it, but she knew they felt it too. Losing Ion had left a hole in them all, an empty place in their hearts that would never quite be filled. Certainly, with time and the fond memories they shared, the pain would start to heal, or at least, that what Natalia wanted to believe. Yet, no matter how much time went by a hole would remain. Like the missing piece of a puzzle, no matter how hard one tried, no other piece would ever quite fit, no other piece would ever look right in its place.

Time would not reverse, it could only go forward. So all they could do to reconcile the past was to build a future. One of which he would be proud, where the endless cries that echoed today wouldn't be necessary. If she could ask a favour of Yulia, it would be no more than that.

Watch over us, Ion.

"Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!" Cantabile's fist smashed against the bloodstained rock, each impact sending pain searing up her arm, but such a superficial sensation was meaningless. She continued to pound on the First Monument, as if her attacks would return the life that had been claimed next to it. She revelled in the pain, it was deserved and a distraction from something that hurt much more.

"Cantabile," Largo's deep voice added to the reassurance of his large hand on her shoulder. "You're going to mess up your good hand if you keep this up."

"Damn it all to hell!" She screamed, giving the hard stone one final blow. The pain made her wince, but a cracked knuckle seemed so completely inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. So did her other arm, tied up in a sling. One reason... give her one good reason not to start hunting
down those- those- bastards right here and now. But she knew that reason. There was a bigger picture here, a world on the line... a world that Arietta should have been a part of.

"This is all my fault. I came here to get Arietta but I let those bastards drive me off. Now... now it's too late."

Largo let out a heavy sigh, his eyes still caught on the flowers that had been laid at the monument's feet. He pulled a single blossom from the depths of his uniform and added it to the bunch. "What happened to Arietta is regrettable," he said. "But she died defending what she believed in. She died an honourable death."

"That's a load of crap," Cantabile spat. "Those bastards just screwed with her feeling and strung her along until they could murder her! I never should have let this go on for so long..." Cantabile lay her head against the cold stone. The sun dipped down below the horizon, painting it red. "I'm sorry kiddo," darkness concealed the drops that fell to the flowers below. "Don't worry... I swear... I swear on my life that I will avenge you..." Cantabile pulled a flower of her own from her pocket and placed it with the others.

"I will avenge you if it's the last thing I ever do."

The familiarity of the Albiore was welcome after the distraught few days that had been spent in Daath. None of them had done anything useful; the entire Order was a chaotic mess with Ion gone. There wasn't any struggle for succession, or at least there wasn't yet, but just the political implications alone had all the ranking members busy. Teodoro had stepped back in to help things along; really there wasn't anything that Guy or any of his friends could do.

The only reason they were still in Daath was because no one had been ready to leave. No one had the strength to start thinking about what would come next, except probably Jade, but he didn't share whatever it was he was thinking, his own way of trying to help them along, probably. But now, they had to go, they had to leave, it was too dangerous to be stuck in one place forever, and there was still the fact that the God-Generals were after Asch and the Sword of Lorelei. With everything that had happened it wasn't a long stretch for them to realize where they would be.

Luke was taking it hard, which wasn't much of a surprise, but it was still hard to watch. One more reason to get out of Daath, he needed to get past this. It was harder for him, he didn't have any experience with losing someone who was really close to him. Guy had lost his family, Asch had had that experience as well, for however short a time it may have been. Tear had lost her brother... and who knew what Jade had lost. The only comfort that the blond could muster was in the knowledge that he was getting better. It was slow, and Guy's best friend was still so breakable, but he was slowly improving.

So there was one thing that still bugged him, and Guy could feel his curiosity wage against his reason. He didn't want to drag up an unpleasant topic... but later would only be worse. Not that he expected much of an answer no matter when he finally got the question out, but the information the topic potentially held could be vital.

"Say Jade," Guy began with caution. "What do you think really happened to Ion? Why did he take a turn for the worse that even the doctors couldn't explain?"

Jade pondered the question for a moment. "I'm not certain," he finally replied. "I suspect it may have had to do with his use of Daathic Fonic artes. He used more than any Fon Master would have otherwise used in a lifetime. He was also a replica; it's possible they had a more permanent effect, that each arte took its toll on his body, never fully recovering after each use. He simply didn't have
the ability to mount a sufficient response against disease anymore."

"If you say so..." Guy answered somewhat sceptically. He wondered what Jade really knew.

"I can't... I can't believe I never noticed anything," Anise managed. "It was my job to protect him, but I couldn't even tell he was getting weaker."

"Don't blame yourself Anise," Tear interceded. "None of us noticed."

Asch listened to varying extents as the others continued to discuss Ion, reasons why they hadn't noticed his steady decline, but the redhead knew that their memories would never serve them such information...because the signs were never there to begin with.

"You know something... don't you?" Asch whispered softly.


"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

Luke shook his head.

Asch tried to offer him a smile, but could see the water swelling in the corners of his little brother's eyes. With a defeated sigh, Asch placed an arm around his sibling and held him, watching Luke's memories across their open connection. A green haired boy in the cheagle woods, a gentle smile, an open heart. He sent a wave of comfort but the sentiment stung, just a reminder that the memories were only that. So Asch sat silently, watching Luke's memories, adding some of his own. He stayed there wordlessly and held Luke, letting him cry for the first friend he'd ever made... and ever lost.
Blackmail

If there was one thing that frustrated Dist the Rose more than anything else it would certainly have to be boredom. After all, there was no reason that a mind so great and so elegant as his own should ever be wasting away precious moments on the mundane trivialities that filled most of this dismal world. It was rather pathetic, but then all else paled in comparison to his own splendour. One couldn't blame them entirely. It would almost be bearable if not for the prosaic task that had been dumped on him.

Understandable as it was that such pitiful minds as his so-called companions' could not be counted upon, babysitting Eldrant while others were focused on their own duties frustrated Dist. How dare they think they could abandon him like this! Was it not already clear that the fomicry machinery that was slowly constructing this marvellous place could sustain itself? That it, being his own precious creation, was utterly infallible? Obviously it hadn't. There were far more important things that he could be doing with his time; all this work, as exquisite as it had turned out, was no more than tinkering, practice for what really mattered. Dist knew it was time to set his own plans into motion, but there remained a... speed bump, and he hadn't quite determined exactly how he planned to get over it just yet.

Opportunity would come, it always did. Then everything would change.

A faint grumbling in the distance distracted Dist from his scheming and disgruntled he followed the source. He wasn't quite sure why he did so, it never ended well; but it was his job and as mundane as it was, he would do it properly. But! If it was Sync, and if he thought he could turn the researcher into a punching bag again because the boy was in one of his consistently foul moods, he had another thing coming! Dist smirked in delight thinking of all the wonderful entries in his beloved revenge journal. Which one could he execute now with minimal preparation? A few came to mind and Dist's grin widened. Oh how he waited for days like these.

A flutter of disappointment when turning the corner revealed no one of consequence: Mohs, complaining about something or another again. Boredom came first, but miserable pawns who thought they had authority were second. Perhaps he ought to begin a list on the last page of his journal. It would be productive at the very least.

"Dist! There you are!" Mohs stated, the grumble still in his undertones unmasked by his inflated ideas of an influence he didn't possess.

"And what is it that's troubling you, Fon Master?" Dist slithered, seeing the man's ego inflate even more at the sound of his title. Arrogance was easier to manipulate than the fon machinery he so loved to tinker with.

"I want to know what on earth Van is thinking!" Mohs protested. "The New Order of Lorelei isn't growing nearly as quickly as it should."

"Patience," Dist insisted. "It will take time for the world to see that you offer them the right solutions."

"Time is something we can't afford anymore!" Mohs insisted. "With that fool Ion's death, Daath is gaining pity and people want to support his ways in his memory. I won't allow for any more people to turn from us! Why is Van so hesitant to reveal the Seventh Fonstone? When is this "right time" of his? After we've lost every bit of the support that we've built?"
A light lit up in Dist's mind. Opportunity always presented itself.

"That's because he doesn't have it anymore," Dist replied in a matter-of-fact tone.

"What are you saying? That's he's lied to me all this time?"

"Of course not. It was stolen from us. Didn't anyone inform you?" Dist asked ever so innocently, an evil glimmer shining in his eye. Of course this fool didn't know.

"By who?" Mohs normally calm disposition had all but disintegrated. Arrogance and rage... putty in Dist's ever dextrous hands.

"I'm sure you already know," he paused for a moment, allowing Mohs to draw the proper conclusion from his implication. "They've hidden it away somewhere, even our resources haven't been able to find it. But... I know of a way you can force them to give it back, and into your capable hands this time, not in anyone else's."

"How?"

"It depends, what is it worth to you?"

"What are you trying to pull?"

"A deal, nothing more, nothing less," Dist answered simply. "I'll tell you how you can get your beloved Fonstone... but in exchange, I want Professor Nebilim's replica data."

Mohs scowled and Dist could tell he was weighing his options. Even the worthless caught a glimpse of their own true essence now and then and could see for themselves what they really were. Mohs knew that Dist would have little use for him once he gave up what the researcher most desired. It would weigh out, for Mohs believed that that silly excuse of a prophesy of his would be the end he sought, his own victory. Dist knew there would be no other outcome for one so single minded as he.

"Fine then," Mohs conceded, removing a disc from his pocket and tossing it to the researcher. Dist grinned.

"Now!" Mohs demanded, his arrogance in full flare overshadowed only by his even greater ignorance. "Tell me how to get the Seventh Fonstone."

The sun had vanished from the horizon but the Albiore still sat quietly in Daath Bay. Ginji had pulled away from the port, making room for other ships to dock, but hadn't strayed far. There wasn't any particular direction to stray towards just yet, and that was fine by him. Ginji may not have known Ion as long as the others, but the loss of one of his friends weighed on him, and he could understand their lack of motivation. It wasn't that much different than he'd felt when Lemon and Tamara had been killed. Though not as deep a wound as losing his family had inflicted, it still hurt more than he was quite sure how to deal with. Even with the few days that had passed, they were still ragged, emotionally worn and though they'd had ample rest each of them remained exhausted to the core.

Ginji absent-mindedly pet Mieu on the head as the young cheagle slept soundly in his lap. Luke had finally kicked the cheagle out of his room, using early sleep as an excuse, even if that excuse had probably become the truth. Ginji could relate, Mieu on a mission to make someone feel better was... well not something patience on a good day could tolerate, forget with the short fuses they all boasted.
At his side, Tear eyed the small prize in his lap enviously, a fact that made Ginji smile. Across from him Asch noted his amusement and a hint of a smile fluttered across his face, his attention more or less on Jade. Guy was also sitting and listening but looked slightly less attentive as the Malkuth Colonel discussed the possibilities for their future course of action. He was really doing nothing more than thinking aloud, laying out who was up to what. There was no doubt that in all his careful explanations, he was hinting at where he wanted them to go, but no one was catching on; not even close. They all just wanted to join their friends who were in bed already, even though they knew this had to be done first. If they wasted too much time now, the world would pay the price later.

"Jade," Asch finally spoke up. "I don't know what you have in mind... but I'd like to head back to Baticul."

"Baticul?" Guy asked curiously.

"Luke, at the very least, needs a break from all this. He'd say he's fine and can keep going, but he can't; he'll break. I know we won't find anything on the miasma there, but it is a library we haven't checked yet. I trust that if there's anything in Yulia City, Teodoro and his men will find it. They know what's there better than we could dream to. We don't have to stay too long, but enough for a break. Luke won't concede to being left behind and I don't intend to try, but he's got to stop, even if it's just for a little bit."

"I think you're right," Guy agreed, pondering Asch's assessment of the situation, but also of his best friend's condition. In many ways Asch was a bit, okay... he was very overprotective, but in this case, he had it dead on. Some time back home, where, for however short a time it may be, things could be normal, would do Luke a world of good.

"Alright then," Jade replied with a nod. Asch's eyes widened slightly before falling into an extremely suspicious look.

"Okay, that was a bit too easy..." the redhead said hesitantly. No way Jade fell for it just like that, especially when his argument lacked any logical reason outside Luke's wellbeing. "What's in Baticul?"

"Really now," Jade adjusted his glasses. "You're angry when I refuse to go along with your ideas, and you're suspicious when I agree to your demands. Is there any way to make you happy?" The man shrugged.

"Jade, what's going on in Baticul?" Guy repeated the question.

"While the rest of you were busy... recovering," he chose his words carefully, "I was searching Daath for clues to Commandant Grants or the God-General's activities."

"What did you find out?" Tear asked.

"Nothing more than a rumour, unfortunately; but it concerns me enough to investigate. There was talk of a Scorer in Baticul, and that those who had their Scores read either died mysteriously or fell seriously ill a few weeks later."

"That sounds an awful lot like some old wives' tale," Asch said, arching an eyebrow. Since when did Jade believe this kind of crap? He was usually the first to bug someone for taking that sort of thing seriously. After messing with their heads, of course.

"But all official Score readings have ceased," Tear pointed out, wondering if that was the part of
the tale Jade found interesting.

"Yes, and the time delay between the Score reading and the death is also consistent with the extraction of replica data," Jade stated. "I'm sure I need not remind who the only one offering Score readings would be."

"Mohs," Asch clued in. "Still, I almost find it hard to believe he'd use his beloved Score as a cover for this."

"Maybe it isn't him doing it," Guy suggested.

"My brother..." Tear trailed off.

"Or one of the God-Generals," Jade suggested with a shrug. "Either way, I'd like to investigate the story further. It may be coincidence."

"I doubt it." Asch sighed. "We're never quite that lucky."

"You're getting your way, aren't you?" The Necromancer said with a sly grin.

"Shut up."

"So Baticul first thing in the morning?" Ginji asked for clarification. He moved the sleeping cheagle into Tear's lap, a wave of satisfaction passing over him when she bit back what he was sure would have been a squeal of delight.

"Yeah," Asch confirmed, suppressing a chuckle of his own. "To Baticul."

Asch stared absent-mindedly out the window of the drawing room. The courtyard was empty, wind tossing around the flowers in the planters. They didn't have the same charm that Pere had once coaxed from them and having finally had the chance to spend some proper time at home he realized he actually missed the old gardener's presence. With a soft sigh, he let his gaze travel around the entryway, from the pillar with the red jewelled sword to the decorative cannon in the corner. Now that he gave it any thought, this was the longest time he'd spent at home since before the Absorption Gate. That realization saddened him. Of all places, this one shouldn't seem so foreign... so distant in his memories.

Movement out the window caught Asch's attention and he turned with his contemplative eyes back towards the courtyard to see Luke coming out of a door across the way. For a moment, Luke's gaze met his own, but Asch knew from experience that the glare on the windows at this time of day kept the older redhead completely invisible from outside eyes. Still, whether Luke had seen him or not, there was a light in his little brother that was slowly returning. Mieu bounced off his shoulder, jumping around the flowers and a chuckle escaped Asch's lips as he watched Luke's expression turn various shades of irritated before finally reaming the hyper cheagle out.

It had been almost a week now that they'd been in Baticul, and in that time Luke had begun to recover. Not completely, but he doubted any of them would completely get over their friend's death. Asch had been afraid at first, worried at what would happen. He was scared seeing the frozen, hollow shell Luke had been that morning and worried even more about what Arietta's death would do to that. A shudder flew down Asch's spine at the memory of the numbness, the emptiness he'd felt from Luke that morning, the frantic screams during Anise's duel... but Luke was getting better now. He would smile again now at the little things that made him happy and the sight warmed all their hearts. It was a reminder to them all that life would go on.
A second burst of motion drew Asch's attention to the other end of the courtyard, and a scowl escaped his lips. Apparently a week at home was more than enough for their father to insist they get some training in. Couldn't he see they needed a break? They didn't come home so he could drive them further into the ground... and yet he expected no less, really. It was so like Father.

"Won't you be joining them?" Susanne's gentle voice joined him by the window.

"No," Asch answered simply.

"Your brother would love it if you did. He always missed you when you were up at the castle and couldn't join them."

Susanne saw her son smile faintly and a flutter of joy rose from her heart despite the pain that was still painted on his face. The last few days had been hard... for both of them and it hurt her to see her sons so upset. He needed something to do to get his mind off of things, and training had been a wonderful excuse to get at least Luke's head away from the more unpleasant topics. Her Asch hadn't wanted to hear any of it though. Life still hadn't dragged that stubbornness from him. For all that he stood there saying otherwise, she knew him well enough to know that, at least some small part of him, wanted to be outside with Luke.

"I can't," Asch said simply.

"Of course you can, you know your father has always left Luke's lessons open to you too. He'd always intended for it to be the two of you."

Asch stubbornly shook his head, trying to lose whatever logic he'd found there. "I can't!" he repeated. "It's not that simple!"

"He knows, you know," Susanne provided softly, her hand gently rubbing the small of his back. "He knows this doesn't make up for everything; it's not his intention that it does." Asch froze and with his sudden tension, Susanne removed her hand. He looked surprisingly up at his mother but she smiled. How easily children could forget; mothers knew everything, especially what was really bothering their children. "He knows how difficult it has been on the both of you with how he'd distanced himself; and that knowledge hurts him more than you realize. He can see it in you."

"What else did he expect?" Asch spat, doing his utmost to hold in the bitterness that spilled into his words.

"But he also sees hope, in Luke, and also in you; there's still a chance that he hasn't completely lost you yet."

"He's too late for that." Asch wasn't going to concede, to accept this. Father couldn't just give them a couple pointers and think it made up for everything. He couldn't just think that the past 18 years of neglect hadn't happened! It was too late to want to play the father figure now. It had happened, Asch remembered every abandoned moment, every pointlessly bitter holiday, and he wasn't going to pretend it hadn't for that man's benefit.

"Someday you'll see it," Susanne replied softly.

"See what?"

"That all this," she paused, "is simply a beginning."

"No, it isn't." Asch argued, knowing full well his mother saw right through him. He hated it, but it was there, a part of him that drew him towards the courtyard where Luke and their father stood.
Turning for a moment, Luke's eyes met his again and his little brother smiled, waving his hand invitingly. Asch should have known the glare wouldn't stop his sibling from knowing he was here. He didn't... he wouldn't go, but the more he thought about it, firming his resolve, the more he realized he couldn't come up with a reason not to. He didn't have any excuses, any valid purpose for avoiding them beyond sheer spite... and that told Asch more about himself than he wanted to consider. Because even knowing that senseless hatred was his only motive... he knew he wouldn't join them.

"I'm not going out there," Asch stated stubbornly.

"I'm afraid you are," Jade's voice broke the silence and had both mother and son turning their heads to greet their newest guest.

"You going to make me?" Asch demanded. Since when did Jade give a damn about his family affairs?

"Of course," Jade answered. "You need to go fetch your brother. It seems our 'special guest' is planning to arrive a day early this week. It would be inhospitable of us not to go meet them."

Asch watched Jade adjusting his glasses, trying to come up with some kind of response. The so-called Scorer, whose identity they'd yet to confirm, was the reason they'd lingered so long in Baticul in the first place. According to the citizens, the Scorer only came to the city once a week on Sylphday. They'd just missed them when they'd arrived last week, and so they'd been forced to wait. Not an unwelcome reprieve; everyone had needed it, but they were starting to get restless. Everyone felt the need to do something, so Asch was glad to hear Jade's news, even with all the uncertainties that came with confronting a God- General.

"I'll go grab him," Asch conceded with a bit of a grumble.

"Well while you're at it, feel free to grab Tear as well," Jade commented with a hint of a smirk. Asch scowled and peered back out the window. Damn it, he was right. Asch had wondered where Mieu had gone, but he was sitting in Tear's lap as she watched Luke and their father spar.

"Sheesh, you're so demanding," Asch shot.

"Surely you wouldn't ask an old man such as myself to do it? Why, just the trip from the castle has me exhausted. I can't take these long days like you young ones can."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm going. I'm going," Asch mumbled, rolling his eyes. "Don't drop dead before I get back old man," he slipped in before closing the door behind him.

"Colonel Curtiss?" Susanne inquired, unable to completely erase the smile from her face in her attempt to be serious.

"Please, just Jade is fine," he replied with a small bow of his head. "I'm not accustomed to being called by my family name."

"Jade, then," she said giving in to the grateful smile. "I wanted to thank you."

"Thank me?" Though expertly hidden in his unwavering tone, the sentiment caught Jade off guard. His eyes swept across the woman standing beside him, but even as her gentle expression returned to the window to watch the proceedings outside, he couldn't quite decipher what she was referring to.

"I know that Asch doesn't always show it and he would certainly never say it," she continued, "but he truly does look up to you. He respects you a great deal, likely more so than he respects his own
father."

"I never intended for-"

"No, it's not like that. I meant it as a compliment," Susanne eagerly cut him off, worried she'd offended him. "It's been like that between them ever since he was little. I've always worried... that the reason he had closed himself off from us, the reason he wouldn't trust anyone was because of everything that had happened to him seven years ago... so I'm happy that he's found someone he can look up to."

"Children can be surprisingly resilient," Jade commented.

"Yes," Susanne agreed. "I hope that now, perhaps, things will improve between him and his father."

"I think that would be difficult."

"Why do you say that?"

"For Asch and his father, it has nothing to do with what happened in the past, with their attitudes in the present or even the paths that may exist in the future. Their problem is really quite simple." Jade adjusted his glasses, procuring a curious look from the Lady beside him. "They are simply too alike."

Susanne smiled. "Yes, I think you're right." His perceptiveness told her how much he truly did understand. That knowledge reassured her. A small sigh escaped her lips as every trace of a smile faded from them.

"Please look after him for me. Look after them both..."

"Good morning Mother," Luke greeted her cheerfully, cutting off any chance for Jade to inquire into her peculiar request.

"So did you figure out where they're going to be?" Tear asked Jade, picking up on a conversation the three must have had outside in the courtyard.

"In previous visits, they've always arrived by ship," Jade replied.

"They don't usually come early though either," Asch pointed out.

"I think the port is probably still the best place to start," Luke pitched in.

"Are the others joining us?" Tear inquired.

"Yes, I had Guy fetch Natalia and Anise from the castle, they're to meet with us by the lift," Jade replied.

Everyone's attention turned to Luke who couldn't quite mask the tension that fell over him. They all knew full well his feelings towards the former Fon Master Guardian; but in spite of them he answered simply. "Then let's go before we miss them again."

None of the tension had vanished.

Searching for a specific person in Baticul's port mid morning was easier said than done. Though not as challenging as it would be in the middle of the afternoon, Natalia would still classify the task
as being unusually tricky. There was always movement, people coming and going, voices shouting as families reunited and sailors went about their work. Crowds were commonplace here and discerning which, if any of yet, held the mysterious Scorer was becoming more difficult of a task by the minute.

Next to her side, Anise walked along and the two of them trailed a bit behind the others. Her usual chipper nature had yet to regain its vigour, and while they'd always had some index of suspicion that such exuberance was her way of protecting herself, there was always a genuine side to it that kept them wondering. Now, it truly came across as forced, but perhaps that was because the Princess knew the truth behind her facade.

It had surprised Natalia when Anise had confided in her the first night. Though they'd been friends, the two of them hadn't been particularly close, at least not in the way she considered herself and Tear. Then again, Anise hadn't really been close to anyone other than Ion, a fact that made her situation all the more tragic. Maybe it was because Anise had also been staying at the castle that she had chosen to come speak with Natalia, but the Princess felt ill-able to give the girl the comfort she needed. Tear always seemed more apt to handle that sort of thing. At the very least she seemed so much stronger in face of such emotional trials and while the melodist may seem outwardly cold and occasionally awkward in light of certain kinds of relationships; once one got beyond all that, she had a big sister aura to her and she was more apt at comforting others than she realized. She could always be counted upon to say what needed to be said, and even if it hurt more at first, the wound healed all the better for it.

Yes, by all rights Anise should have gone to Tear; but the reason she didn't was most likely because Tear was close to Luke and it didn't take any stretch of the imagination to see the problem there. Luke was still furious with Anise for what had happened to Arietta, with how everything had played out during their duel, and Natalia's younger cousin simply refused to speak to her. Natalia knew better, and knew full well that Anise felt awful about what she'd done, but Anise wouldn't apologize to Luke. She was angry, resenting the fact that Luke had spoken to Ion before he died, that he'd gotten those last few moments with him... a chance she would never have. It was a senseless grudge, one born of the anger that came with loss, which was probably why no one moved to intervene. They all knew the two would make things right once they figured out how to properly deal with their feelings.

Lost in thought, Natalia nearly collided head on with her fiancé, not noticing that everyone had stopped. Another of the morning ferries had pulled in, it was a large one from Chesedonia and the chaos it had made of the port turned their search futile. With a careful eye on the sole set of tracks for the cable cars that led into the city, they stood and waited.

The silence would have been more painful if it weren't for the murmur of the crowds that filled Tear's ears, but she could do without all the shoving. Luke had to be getting annoyed with the number of times she'd jostled him by this point, but if that was the case, he definitely wasn't showing it. He'd just smile and tell her it was fine even though she could barely hear him. She'd return the gesture only to have the whole thing repeat itself again a few minutes later. But that was so like Luke; he would never share his burdens, never inflict his own pain on another. No matter how much he was suffering, he always did it in silence.

Tear wished he wouldn't; it made her feel so helpless when she wanted to help. How could she get to know him better when he wouldn't share what was hurting him? Part of her watched him scrupulously, hoping to find a part of him being unreasonable, pointlessly moping or taking out his emotions on others, but his mourning was flawless in that sense. It frustrated her; she'd lost even that entrance. She could still remember the days when they'd first met. Her criticisms of how he'd selfishly lashed out at times had him defending himself; it had given her a window into how he
was feeling. She wanted a way to get him to talk to her, even if it was in anger, but such paths, as petty as they may be, were no longer open to her.

Tear continued to watch Luke as the crowd around them dissipated, losing herself among other thoughts that drifted across her mind. She wondered who was giving the Score readings. Was it one of the God-Generals themselves? That limited their opponent to either Sync or Major Legretta; perhaps Major Cantabile if she'd recovered from their previous encounter. Though it felt like an eternity ago, the short couple weeks that had passed weren't likely to be enough to see her former teacher well. Of course there was the chance it was one of the other God-Generals accompanying a Scorer that had once worked in Daath. Tear didn't know much about politics, but she couldn't fathom what all the people who had once earned a living reading the Score had done once it had all been put to a halt.

Digressing off the trail her thoughts had been following, Tear was exceptionally weary of the upcoming confrontation. With Arietta's death being on their watch, their fault, there was no saying with what passion their opponents would meet them. In the thinning crowd, a gathering slowly made itself evident. It readily grew, and the excited murmurs quickly drew their suspicion.

"All who desire a reading of the Score, follow me! All who come shall have a reading!"

"Sync!" Anise broke through the crowd, knocking over several women and an elderly man that Natalia managed to catch before the poor guy hurt himself. Guy would definitely give it to her, she could clear a path when she'd a mind to, and with that flash of achingly familiar green hair, she definitely had a mind to.

"What are you doing?" Anise demanded. "The Order of Lorelei has called a halt to all Score readings!"

"That's right," Tear agreed, raising her voice so the crowd could hear. "That Scorer is a fake!"

"It doesn't matter!" A young man put himself between Anise and Sync, his arms stretched out in defence of the boy who, despite what he may have believed, didn't need it. "We want to know the Score!"

"Yeah, he's right!" Another woman put herself in the way, imitating the first man's position. "We have a right to hear the Score!"

"Yeah!"

"Yeah, that's right!" Shouts of agreement echoed throughout the crowd.

"Anise, I'm so hurt that you would say such things," the soft voice shot daggers through them all. Of all the low-life tricks- how could Sync even- and yet they were both replicas of the same person, and he could pull off Ion almost flawlessly. Yet despite the gentle face and innocent eyes that Sync put on, there was a sharpness to him that mocked the gesture.

"Please let me go," Sync continued using Ion's intonation. "Anise, you of all people should understand..."

"Go burn in hell Sync!" Anise snapped every bit of anger she'd felt in the past week flared and even the cocky God-General took a step backwards, but a smug grin quickly spread on his face. With his civilian shields, they didn't dare make a move.

"What do you know about hell?" Sync shot back.
"More than you do," Anise replied, her voice dripping with menace.

"You know nothing; but it doesn't matter, you'll learn soon enough. Go ahead, fight all you want, because the world that failure of a Fon Master wanted will never come to pass. It's inevitable; he was the prime example," Sync said, defiance pouring from him. It was a confrontation he would win; both sides knew it. "The Score said Fon Master Ion would get sick and die, and look at what happened to him. Your Ion died like a dog. For all he talked big about a new future, he couldn't even escape his own fate. Pathetic."

"You take that back!" Anise charged forward but was caught by Asch and Jade who held the flailing girl away from the civilians. "What are you doing you guys! Let me go! I'm going to rip his sorry little head off!"

"No one escapes the Score," Sync spat. "Now, as I was saying before, all who want Score readings, follow me!"

"I'm going to kill him! Damn it, Colonel! Let me go!" Anise screamed in defiance but remained tightly in her friends grip as Sync led his following into the city proper.

"That bastard!" Luke muttered under his breath. "How could he...

"Are you going to be alright, Anise?" Natalia inquired.

"I'm fine!" Anise stated. The dark haired girl stopped struggling, proving she had gathered herself enough to be let go. Asch and Jade released their hold. "He's not going to be next time we meet though," she added.

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"I said I'm fine!" Anise insisted.

"You needn't to push yourself."

"I'm not pushing anything..." Anise mumbled.

"There are more people than last time," Jade commented, diverting the attention from Anise. "From what I gathered, last week's group was only half the size."

"So... all those people are going to die?" Luke hesitantly asked.

"No, not all originals are killed by the data extraction process, you've one of your own to prove that," Jade said with a bit of a smirk. "Still, the survival rate isn't something worth bragging about, and those who survive are likely to fall ill. It's also possible that they'll suffer other negative effects from the data extraction; it's not uncommon to see a resounding effect in the originals."

"W-Wait, what kind of negative effects?" Luke's voice suddenly had a panicked edge.

'Relax,' Asch's voice filled Luke's mind before Jade could open his mouth to offer the same explanation. 'If anything was going to be wrong with me, it would have happened within a week at the most, it's been seven years and I'm fine. Besides, Spinoza's been keeping an eye on me too. If there was anything wrong, we'd know about it.'

'Right,' Luke answered, still vaguely suspicious. Asch didn't seem to be concerned, but he'd learned full well how easy it was to hide feelings from each other.
No more lies.

It was okay... they'd promised.

Luke's worry melted a bit, and he sent Asch a grateful look. Asch returned a quick smile but jumped right back into the problem at hand.

"Whether or not all of them will die is not the issue. Most of them will get hurt in some way; we can't let this keep going on," the older redhead declared.

"I suppose it would be best if we brought the problem to Father's attention," Natalia agreed. "Now that we know the Scorer's identity, the guard should be able to deter Sync, at least from Baticul."

"That's the most we can hope for, I'm afraid," Guy agreed. "We can't do much about the other places he's probably visiting."

"Then let's head up to the castle," Asch suggested.

"Wait-" Luke froze where he was standing, stopping all his companions who had started towards the cable cars.

"Luke, what's the matter?" Tear asked. "We really shouldn't hang around..." the melodist trailed off. He wasn't paying attention to her.

"Come on, Luke, this really isn't-"

"Shhht!" Guy was cut off by Asch. "What do you hear?" he asked.

Then they all heard the scream.

"Shut up you little slut," the murmurs from the darkened alleyway were barely audible. "We'll teach you to think you can steal stuff from us."

"Uh huh," a second deep voice agreed. "Don't matter if you're a girl or not, thieves get no mercy!"

"Hey!" Luke yelled. "What do you think you're doing?" The younger redhead was in that alley faster than anyone could blink.

The poor girl looked no older than 14, collapsed on the ground, her trembling arms were up guarding her face from the three large men that stood over her. Two of the men held wooden boards, the third, a crowbar used to open the large crates around the docks. The girl had dark brown curls that fell just below her face. Her tattered, mismatched clothing hung from her and barely covered her pale skin, stained as it was by the blood of both fresh injuries and old ones. Her eyes were tightly shut, peaking open only for a second when the blow she was expecting didn't come.

"Leave her alone!" Luke jumped between the girl and her attackers.

"Hey, who are you?" The man with the crowbar, and obviously the leader, demanded. "Don't get in our way. This girl stole from our cargo on our ship. She's a thief, and we'll handle her."

"It doesn't- that's beside the point!" Luke managed, visibly bothered. He glanced behind him at the scared young girl and the emptiness that hid just behind the fear. He didn't doubt who, or rather what she was for a second. "Stop this. It isn't her fault, she doesn't know any better!"

"No excuses for stealing!" Another of the men threw in. "She thinks she can pretend to be Melanie and take our cargo, we won't let 'er! She needs to be taught a lesson!"
"Thief or not, there are proper procedures for handling this sort of matter," Natalia declared drawing the mens' attention.

"Can't be..."

"No way-"

"P-Princess Natalia?" The leader stuttered, "What brings you down to-"

"Her business here is none of your concern," Asch stepped in. The mens' blanched faces told them they recognized Asch, and looking back, now realized who Luke was as well.

"She's a criminal-"

"What is her crime?" Asch demanded.

"She stole food from our ship! Food we need to make the trip to Chesedonia!" Hearing the man, Luke noticed a handful of apples scattered across the ground. One- two- Luke couldn't count more than five! They were ready to beat her to death over five apples? As outraged as he was, Luke knew... it had nothing to do with what she'd stolen; nothing to do with her crime and everything to do with how she'd been born, who she looked like, thousands of petty reasons, all beyond her control.

"There are proper procedures for theft," Natalia cut them off. "If it occurs again, you're to report it and turn the thief over to the guards. Dealing out punishment is *not* your responsibility."

"Yes, Princess," the three men muttered, clearly disgruntled.

"I think you'd best return to your work," Asch suggested harshly. The men didn't waste any time complying.

"I don't care what they say... she's just creepy," one man whispered when they thought they were out of an earshot.

"Yeah... she looks just like Melanie."

"Impossible, I 'eard Melanie died... Horis went to 'er funeral an e'rything..." the rest of their conversation faded with the men in the distance.

"A replica..." Guy concluded sadly. "I wonder how many have met the same fate as her."

"That's just horrible," Tear stated. "They're- how could they treat people that way?"

"It's because they don't see them as people," Asch answered. "Or it's like those three, who knew the original and know they died. They go further than they know they should because the resemblance scares them."

"Shhhhh, it's okay... it's okay," Luke said softly. Guy smiled, watching his best friend try to coax the terrified replica from her shell. The poor thing seemed petrified of all of them, and really, with how people had treated her, could they blame her?

She had pretty brown eyes, still alight with fear, but she'd lowered her arms at least. Luke smiled gently, and removed his jacket. The motion sent the replica's arms flying up again. "It's alright," Luke continued softly. "We won't hurt you," he placed his jacket over the torn fabric that had once been some kind of top. "What's your name?"
The replica looked at him, her fear diluted by confusion, unsure what Luke was asking of her. Luke brought a hand up to his chest. "My name is Luke," he said. "What's yours?"

"I- I- d-don't have a name." The clarity with which the girl spoke caught them all off guard. So she had been 'pre-programmed' like the others. Well at least it didn't look like her emotions had suffered much because of it. "D-Don't h-hurt"

"We're not going to hurt you," Luke said calmly. The replica clutched his jacket closer. "Hmmm, but you are going to need a name. What do others call you? Someone must have given you one."

"1-5-7-9-6," she said.

"Well..." Luke wasn't quite sure how to respond to that. "Don't worry, we'll think of something."

"Something," the girl repeated.

"No, no!" Luke shook his head. "Not something, that's not a name! We'll think of a name for you later. Seemingly understanding this, the replica hesitantly nodded.


"It's okay, this is Asch, he's my brother; he won't hurt you either." The concept of siblings apparently hadn't been part of her programming and she clutched Luke even tighter. Asch couldn't resist a smile and a small sigh. Really, it was like Luke had picked up a stray kitten or something. Asch gave him a pointed look.

"I don't know," Luke answered, "but I want to help her. Do you think we could ask Father if she could work at the manor? I'm sure they could teach her to cook or something. It would give her a job and food and a place to live at least."

Asch stifled a chuckle as the stray kitten analogy flashed through his head again.

"Bad idea?" Luke asked, misinterpreting his sibling's amusement.

"No I think it's a great idea," Asch answered. "It won't hurt to ask him. We'll run ahead and meet you guys up at the castle," he suggested, turning to face his friends.

"Sounds like a plan to me," Guy agreed and watched them lead the frightened girl away. She seemed content enough with Luke there beside her. The blond didn't doubt she'd fit in at the manor, especially if her learning capacity was anything like Luke's was as a newborn. She'd manage just fine, enough of the maids up there would swarm all over her and Guy knew first hand that if she didn't have a heart attack from the sudden burst of strange women, she'd be well taken care of. There was someone, however, who didn't seem entirely pleased with how comfortable she seemed with Luke.

"You look awfully upset, Tear," Anise taunted.

"Wh-what are you talking about?"

"Come on, you've had that almost sour look on since Luke found her," Anise elbowed the melodist.

"I-I have not," Tear protested. "I'm just upset with how those men were treating her! It was terrible that they would do that to another person. Besides, Luke was the one who defended her, it's no surprise she feels safer with him..."
"Someone sounds jealous," Anise almost sang. "Admit it; you just wished you were in her place right now."

"I was worried about her!" Tear insisted fruitlessly.

"It's such a terrible thing," Natalia spoke up earning her both a grateful smile from tear and an angry pout from Anise. "Things are horribly unfair for the replicas. They just don't know any better, and yet they've no way to defend themselves. They've know way of knowing to defend themselves. It isn't their fault... but the things that they do only adds to the stigma around them."

"Yeah, I think what Luke said back on Feres Isle holds true," Guy commented. "Replicas aren't a bad thing and its fine if there's someone who is willing to take care of them and raise them properly. It just the way Mohs is doing things... it hurts everyone. Luke may have been able to save that one girl, but he can't save every replica that way."

"He knows that as well," Natalia stated.

"Yeah," Guy agreed solemnly. "He does. We need a more permanent solution for the replicas, for this whole situation. Something that can last beyond a few months; after all, we can stop Mohs from making more, but the ones that are here are going to need to find a place in the world."

"That could be easier said than done," Natalia pointed out.

"Well, for now, we should be heading up to the castle," Jade interrupted. "At this rate, our boys will beat us there."

"Well it's not like they've never made us wait," Guy shrugged. "But Jade's right, we probably should get going before another ship pulls in and the cable cars get crowded." The blond shuddered. "The ride here was a nightmare."

"Don't worry Guy!" Anise piped up. "I'll hold you the entire time, that way no weird women will bump into you!"

"Uh n-n-no, I think that'll just make it worse."

"Don't thank me, it's my pleasure!"

"Jade, say something!" Guy demanded.

"Why, I think it's such a lovely gesture on her part. Really, you ought to let her do her good deed for the day."

Guy sighed in defeat. "Why me...?"

Jade's foresight had yet to waver, and as predicted, both Luke and Asch were patiently waiting outside the castle gates by the time Guy and his friends had arrived. The blond could tell, if only by the look on Luke's face, that his mood had improved and that things had gone smoothly as far as the replica he'd adopted, for lack of any better way of putting it, was concerned.

"How's she doing?" Guy inquired.

"Terrified," Luke answered with a chuckle. "But Ramdas is looking after her so she should be okay."

"Anyone would be scared with the reception your maids give." Guy said with a shudder only
adding to Luke's laughter. He may not have been there when Guy started but no doubt that Asch had shared stories, and it didn't take much imagination to fill in the gaps.

"I just wish there was more I could do for them," Luke confessed. "I helped her, but there are so many others out there who are being treated the same way, or even worse."

"Just one small step at a time."

"What?"

"No one can do everything at once," Guy explained. "You have to take things one step at a time. Do what is in your power to do. You helped someone today, maybe next time you can help a few more. Don't tackle too much too soon. Every little bit counts."


"Someone has to keep things in perspective," he teased. "Besides, it's not like the replicas will be going anywhere, you've got lots of time to think of and work on a solution for them. I'm sure Asch would help you, it's something that affects the entire country."

"Yeah, you're right." Guy smiled and he could see Luke pondering the problem. The mildly frustrated pout that popped up also told him there weren't any immediate ideas that came to mind. Still, the thought of a project that he could help Asch with had him excited. Luke knew he didn't have the responsibilities Asch did, but he still wanted to be a part of it. He just wanted to be able to help.

The throne room was quiet, a reprieve perhaps, because His Highness looked unusually tired, even before they had shared their story with him. Guy could imagine just how much he had on his plate, especially with the recent conclusion of the Summit. Not only would the politics of the matter have him busy enough, but there was undoubtedly a hoard of complaints and civilian rallies to be dealt with as the miasma continued to linger.

"I have heard rumours of this Scorer," the king confirmed. "However, the ban on Score readings was a voluntary one on Daath's behalf. There are no laws in Kimlasca forbidding them. Though it may be part of a greater scheme, we've no grounds on which to arrest the Scorer or even to intervene."

"I believe there are grounds upon which to act," Natalia protested.

"What grounds are those?"

"Your Majesty, if I may," Jade stepped in. "Along with the Scorer, I'm certain you've observed the recent spike in Baticul's death count, have you not?"

"Are you suggesting the two are connected?"

"I'm certain of it," Jade confirmed. "The Score readings are nothing more than a cover for the extraction of replica data, a process that has time and again proven to be life-threatening to the individual involved."

"But Asch-" one of the King's advisors began.

"Likely had a brush with death as a result of his own experience in the matter," Jade finished. "He was lucky; not all your citizens have been as such." The advisor backed off.
"We'll see what we can do about the matter," Ingobert finally replied. "Unfortunately I can't make any promises. Our forces are strained as it is, even with the White Knights lending us some of their numbers."

"What has everyone so busy?" Asch asked, concern ringing through in his voice.

"The replicas," the monarch answered simply. "Though a good deal of them left the city some time ago, there are many that linger. We know that they don't know better and their actions aren't entirely their fault, but they are still performing crimes, and that must be addressed. With no one to teach them the rules, the situation isn't improving. The other day a replica turned up at his original's funeral. Several guards were injured in the ensuing riot and the replica, along with almost a dozen others, was killed. There's just no end to the problems that need addressing."

"And still there's the issue of the miasma," a courtier provided. "As of yet neither Malkuth, nor Kimlascan researchers have found a solution and the people are growing fearful. Many have begun to fall ill due to its effects, at this rate there's no saying what may befall the world. Our hands are full without having to keep tabs on random Scorers."

"That you try is all we ask," Natalia stated. "Now more than ever, we can't let our country waver. We must stand strong through these difficult times!"

"Jade," Asch asked, his voice barely a whisper behind Natalia who continued to rally the court. "Back on Feres Isle, where is it that the replicas said they were going?"

"They mentioned a place called the Tower of Rem," Jade supplied cautiously. What did Asch want with that-

"Your Majesty!" A guard burst into the courtroom. "A representative from the New Order of Lorelei has arrived. He demands an audience with Your Majesty immediately."

"Of all the times-" Ingobert cut himself off with a frustrated sigh, growing years older before their eyes. "Let him in."

Largo's stature hadn't diminished in the least, and the time that had passed since their last encounter with the man had, if possible, increased his already overbearing size. He walked down the center of the room, his massive scythe comfortably perched over his shoulder, passing the entire group as if they weren't even there.

"I am here as an emissary of the New Order of Lorelei," Largo declared. "I bring a message from Fon Master Mohs."

Anise tensed, but clamped her mouth shut. That pig didn't deserve to even think the title of Fon Master much less claim it! But she knew better than to think she could something about it now. Natalia placed a hand on her shoulder, but rather than take it as an insult to her self control, she was glad for its presence. The pressure of Natalia's grip told her that at least someone agreed with her.

"What is it?" Ingobert asked.

"Fon Master Mohs demands that you turn over the Seventh Fonstone in your possession to the New Order of Lorelei."

"Even if we were to possess such a thing, what authority does Mohs think he holds over us?" Ingobert's advisor demanded. "Our Kingdom of Kimlasca-Lanvaldear has agreed to abandon the Score; we've no use for such a thing. Such demands are an insult."
"Do not think you can hide secrets from our eyes," Largo answered calmly. "We can confirm it is in your possession, and if you do not agree to our terms, then we shall reveal your involvement in illegal research."

"What are you talking about?" Natalia jumped in.

"We have evidence that proves Kimlasca's monarchy has been turning a blind eye to illegal fomicry research and has even been supporting it to achieve their own personal benefit."

"You dirty bastards," Asch hissed.

"Unless you agree to turn over the Fonstone, we shall make this information public, not just in your own Kingdom, but across Auldrant." Tense silence befell the courtroom.

"Fine," Ingobert finally conceded. "We shall have a party escort you to the location at a later date."

"We'll escort Mohs on Kimlasca's behalf," Asch stepped in.

"That's fine," Largo replied. "I shall deliver your message to Fon Master Mohs. The date, however, shall be of his choosing."

Without leaving anytime to protest, Largo turned and left the courtroom, silence filling his wake long after the guard had returned and confirmed his departure.

"That good for nothing, lousy son of a bitch!" Anise yelled at no one in particular. "I'm gonna kill Mohs! I'm gonna kill him faster than I'm gonna kill Sync."

"Save a piece for me," Asch added, his own voice full of malice.

"What are you guys thinking?!" Luke burst out. "We can't just hand over the Seventh Fonstone! What about the agreement with Malkuth? If Mohs gets the Fonstone, everyone is going to turn over to the New Order!"

"Still, more importantly, we can't let that information get out," Asch answered solemnly. "The people in this room are pretty much the only ones who know that we've let research on living replicas slide. If that information got to the wrong people in Malkuth it would start another war, and I'm sure Mohs' seeds in Peony's court would be the first to know. That war wouldn't be hard for them either, even if just the Kimlascan nobility found out, they'd jump at the chance. We'd have half if not most of Kimlasca against us too. It could lead to the upheaval of the entire system and an unimaginable amount of chaos. We absolutely can't let that happen, especially with world affairs being the way they are. That's probably what Mohs really wants. Getting the Seventh Fonstone is a bonus."

Luke shook his head, "B-but what about the deal with Peony, and- Mohs would have half the world under his thumb if he gets that Fonstone!"

"That's why we're to be the ones to accompany them," Jade explains. "If worse comes to worse we'll simply have to destroy the Seventh Fonstone."

"I'm sure they don't expect us to actually hand it over to them," the advisor commented. "Be on your guard."

"We will," Asch agreed.

"I wonder if it's even possible to completely destroy," Ingobert wondered. "None-the-less, I'm
"counting on you to handle this," he said, his eyes on both Asch and Natalia.

"Don't worry we will," Asch answered with a nod. "We need to find a way to get rid of the miasma before Mohs demands to see the Seventh Fonstone. That or..."


"Or we find a way to deal with Mohs once and for all."

"Alright! That's what I want to hear!" Anise cheered.

"It's only mid-afternoon, but shall we dismiss court for now?" The advisor suggested. "There is much to be discussed with the council."

"Yes," Ingobert agreed wearily, turning to his daughter and her companions. "I wish you the best of luck."

"Thank you," Natalia replied. "We won't disappoint you." Following her father, they all left the room. There was much they would have to discuss as well.

Asch lingered in the court long after everyone had left, the weight of the situation starting to stifle him. Mohs had played quite the hand, and getting out of it wasn't going to be nearly as simple as they hoped. Damn him! Asch's fists began to tremble, but whether it was really from the rage he felt burning inside him, or the other conclusion he'd drawn, that he couldn't be sure.

"I'm certain you think you're quite clever," Jade's voice broke the silence.

"What are you talking about, old man?"

"I don't have to be Luke to know what you're thinking."

"Really? And just what is that?"

"You want to sacrifice the replicas instead of Seventh Fonists in order to eliminate the miasma," Jade replied, satisfied by the surprise Asch tried to mask on his face. "Not only do you get rid of the miasma, but you'll solve the problem with the replicas. Two birds with one stone as it were. Very efficient; just, you're forgetting one little thing."

"No, I'm not. I know what it means."

"I can't imagine Luke is-"

"Don't tell Luke," Asch cut Jade off. "He... wouldn't understand."

"He'll find out eventually."

"I know, but until then..."

Jade sighed. "If you say so."

Luke started at the small fonstone in his hand in pure frustration. He had half a mind to throw it out his window and clear across the yard where he wouldn't have to look at it for at least a day, even if he knew full well he'd never do such a thing. This stone, this Score, was Ion's last gift to him, but Luke was very quickly starting to doubt Ion's faith that he could figure this out on his own.
He'd spent well over an hour with the thing, playing around with Seventh fonons but so far he had nothing. Luke didn't know the first thing about Score reading; after all, it wasn't like he'd ever had his Score read. All he knew was that it had to do with the Seventh Fonon, at least it should. That's why only Seventh Fonists could be Scorers, right? But without any knowledge on the subject, and without having the first clue what to look for, Luke didn't even know where to start.

Luke had toyed with the idea of asking Tear. He'd seen her read the Score before; she must know how it's done. Luke sighed; he couldn't turn to her, because then he'd have to explain why he wanted to know, and that he couldn't do. He had promised.

Why had Ion given him this Score anyways? The Score was off track, and even if it wasn't, Luke didn't show up in it. Nothing made sense... didn't it defeat the point of finding a future beyond what the Score foretold? That's what Ion had wanted to do all this time, right? To build a new future...

He was the prime example. The Score said 'Fon Master Ion will get sick and die' and look at what happened to him. Your Ion died like a dog.

Sync's words rang painfully through Luke's head. It was true though... Ion had gotten sick, and he'd died, just like his original had, just like the Score said. Was what the God-Generals said true after all? Was it really impossible to escape the future the Score held? Was that what Ion had been trying to relay with this? Even Ion had given up on abandoning the Score in the end...

Damn it! Luke threw his pillow at the wall, leaving it fall harmlessly beside his bed. Why couldn't he figure this out? Now when he needed that guidance the most... when he needed his friend's words of advice more than anything, why wouldn't it work? Luke just couldn't shake the foreboding feeling that had overtaken him and without even knowing why, he suddenly feared for the future more than he'd ever before.

What could Ion have wanted to tell him?
The Tower of Rem

There was less disappointment than usual in the air when they finally departed Baticul, and no one could say they were entirely upset to be back on the Albiore. Guy sat among his friends and while there was still tension between Luke and Anise, they were handling it like adults. There would be the odd reminder, a snide remark on Anise's behalf, a comment Luke would conveniently ignore, but for the most part they kept their problems to themselves, and it was nice to have everyone together again.

Excited chatter filled the Albiore while Ginji made preparations to take-off. They hadn't wasted any time getting things underway after hearing Largo's ultimatum and with the exception of a day to resupply the Albiore, Asch had them off and running. Where to? Ginji was probably the only one who knew that... well him and Jade since nothing got by the Malkuth Colonel unless he was intentionally letting it slip. Which was the scarier scenario...? Guy had made the decision long ago that he never wanted to find out. If anyone else had any ideas they certainly weren't sharing. He'd already questioned Luke on it, but asking Luke these things was starting to be about as useful as asking Asch himself. Luke had learnt to keep his brother's secrets far better than when they'd been children. Little did Asch know that it was because of his little brother that they'd found out about the majority of the mischief the two had gotten themselves into as kids. Just too honest for his own good sometimes, not that it was a bad thing.

Guy kind of missed those days, and he was surprised he felt that way. All the years growing up he'd have given anything to be somewhere else, namely back with his family, yet anywhere would have done. Then Luke had come, and those years had become tolerable, then almost enjoyable. Now he longed for the simplicity that had once existed between the three of them and where the biggest secret was who had left the big stain on Lady Susanne's favourite carpet. The dark in which Asch kept them was not only unnerving, but it made the blond feel further from him than ever.

Asch had always been distant, always. It was strange how the memories change according to one's current perspective. Before his kidnapping Asch had been open, cheerful and honest; yet thinking of him in comparison to Luke who always laid everything bare before the blond, even back then Asch seemed cautious. Then there was the boy who'd returned to them after the kidnapping, who at times may as well have not come home with the distance he put between himself and the world. Still, Guy had seen the changes in him over the past year. Slowly but steadily he was learning to trust, to open up and chance some of the pain he'd been cowering from behind his self-imposed walls. People had inched closer and his world had grown.

Now it just seemed that every action he took, each word from his mouth was tense, carefully planned and placed for the sole purpose of pushing them back. Everyone, including Natalia, was being held at an arm's length. Even Luke, the one person who had always been allowed behind his walls, was now sitting on the outside looking in. Luke couldn't see it, but Guy knew he could feel it; Luke knew something was different, was wrong, but couldn't quite place it. It left Guy worried, more worried than he could begin to comprehend. If Asch was snapping back to his old ways, what could possibly lay beyond the horizon?

"So Asch, I'm all happy to be on the road and such," Anise began. "But do you plan to tell us where we're going?"


"Where?" Guy choked out, not quite getting the surprise out of his voice before the words escaped him. Here he'd been expecting something like Chesedonia, Grand Chokmah, maybe Yulia City,
just what was Asch thinking?

"The Tower of Rem," Asch repeated a shade more annoyed than the first time. "It's where the replicas from Feres Isle were going."

"You mean Mary and her group?" Luke inquired.

"Yeah, and Uncle said that a lot of the replicas had left Baticul a few weeks ago. If they went anywhere, I'd bet it's there."

"I still find it difficult to believe that replicas that have likely never met, would know to gather at one place from all around the world," Natalia stated.

"It was likely part of the forced programming," Jade explained. "An order put in their heads at the time of their creation."

"Birth," Asch automatically corrected him.

"Something to the extent of 'if something happens, go there'," the Colonel finished, not attempting to hide the flutter of annoyance that came with the redhead's interruption.

"But what makes you want to go there?" Tear inquired.

"The replicas right now are a huge variable," he replied. "There's a pretty good chance Mohs has abandoned them, and there's no saying what they'll do. I want to negotiate with them."

Everyone remained silent, expecting him to continue, but that was all the information Asch was going to provide of his own free will it seemed. Perhaps it was just Natalia imagining it, but something seemed off about him since they departed from Baticul. He seemed... quieter than usual. A silly notion in itself, for Asch was never the buoyant or outspoken type; unless he was engaged in conversation, he tended to remain to himself even among friends. None-the-less, the more she watched him, the more the word 'withdrawn' seemed to fit. Natalia made a mental note to speak with him the next time the two were alone together.

"Unfortunately," Jade spoke up, "You're missing a vital problem."

"And what might that be?" Asch asked sceptically. His mood seemed to have run afoul wherever his usual presence had and the sharper reply caught even the princess off guard.

"The Tower of Rem is an ancient tower that was built during the Dawn Age and remained in the Qliphoth until the lands were lowered only just recently," Jade explained as if Asch's response were no less harsh than usual. He did drop his somewhat taunting tone though, signal enough that he had at least acknowledged Asch's disposition. "I doubt anyone outside of Yulia City could tell us its exact location."

"Already taken care of," Asch half heartedly tossed a scroll at Jade, something the Colonel proceeded to examine.

"Interesting..." Jade mulled over the parchment. "Someone's scribed a map of the Qliphoth over a world map. Not entirely accurate, but enough to give us direction."

"Where'd you come across that?" Guy asked.

"Where else?" Asch shot.
"Dark Wings," Luke answered simply though admittedly he hadn't known about their involvement until his sibling had made the implication. All of this was news to him, something that was becoming a bit too familiar lately. What was up with Asch's plans constantly coming out of the blue lately? Luke would be the first to admit he hadn't been the most attentive or supportive person over the past week, something for which he felt horribly guilty. He was the only one who had known Ion's death was coming, he should have been helping comfort the others to whom it had come as a shock. Instead he'd been the worst of them all. Still, attentive or not... something seemed different with Asch this time around, he just couldn't put his finger on it.

"I take it they haven't found the Jewel either?" Jade asked.

"No," Asch admitted, frustration underlying his statement; both at the answer and at how easily he was being read.

"The Tower of Rem it is, I guess," Guy broke the awkward silence and found his companions nodding in agreement. No one really had any better ideas, but that didn't lift an ounce of the blond's suspicion. Asch's words rang false and Guy of all people had learnt not to fall for his word games as a child. What he intended to negotiate was the heart of the matter, and his reluctance to explain left Guy wary.

If he was so blatantly avoiding the topic, then it couldn't be good. And if it wasn't good, where would that leave them now?

Though the Albiore took to the sky, every one of its passengers was left with a sinking feeling.

It had all started so innocently.

Less than a week ago now, Tear had found a deck of cards in Luke's room. Having never had such things as a child, she had asked Luke to teach her how to play. He'd gladly taken her up on it, and Old Maid had become Crazy Eights which then became Go Fish. That's when Guy had come in to see what they were up to and Rummy was added to the list. Asch came across them bringing the game of Speed to the table. Watching the twins play was undeniably entertaining and the number of games that must have been played over the years for them to be that fast was something the melodist didn't want to fathom. She made a mental note not to challenge either of them in the future.

But that had been back in Baticul; tonight, seated next to a roaring campfire, all eight of them were playing Anise's game: Poker. Okay, so they weren't playing her game entirely.

Jade folded.

"See guys!" Anise practically pounced. "We could have had his shirt off this round!" Apparently she was still keeping score.

"Not if Mieu hadn't been bouncing around for the first couple games," Guy pointed out. Everyone laughed in unison. Alongside Tear, the little cheagle had been learning the rules of the various games, but the concept of secrecy hadn't quite occurred to him and his habit of jumping from shoulder to shoulder and proclaiming his amazement at the straight you had in your hand made any poker face completely useless.

"He still would have had to lose it," Anise grumbled.

"Wow, Anise, I didn't think you were that into Jade," Asch taunted, having also been among those who had adamantly refused to play strip poker. Only Anise could come up with a game like that
and actually be serious about playing it.

"Hey, with all that time in the military and being the workaholic he is, I bet he's got loads of money stashed away somewhere!" Anise chirped excitedly, a dour look quickly replacing the grin. "You guys aren't any fun at all; we could have at least bet real gald."

"But Anise, if we'd played either version, you'd either be broke, or would only have a few garments left," Natalia pointed out with a giggle.

"It's still more exciting than betting stupid cooking duty," she pouted, more at being reminded of her exemplary losing streak. Still, she had to admit she was having fun, even if it was starting to look like Jade wasn't going to have to lift a finger for the rest of the trip. Heck, he'd already conned Guy into walking Peony's rappigs for three months after their journey. That was... assuming there would be an after. Losing Ion had been a harsh reminder of just how fragile and easily lives could be lost. That's why... they had to try and enjoy themselves while they still could; there was no saying what could happen to any of them. Anise shook her head. She had told herself she would think about that tonight; right now they were having fun, laughing for the first time in a long time and she wasn't going to sulk. Ion would never forgive her if she did. Alright! Next round she was getting out of cleaning the Albiore's windows for sure!

Tear giggled as Asch conceded the match, leaving Natalia victorious for this round, one of the few that hadn't gone to the Colonel. The Princess had a mysterious knack for winning every round that involved cooking duty in any way, shape or form. Tear wouldn't complain though, she didn't mind Asch's cooking. For being a noble, he really wasn't bad at preparing food. It made her wonder where he'd picked up the skills; she highly doubted, with his father being the way he was, that Asch had spent a day in the kitchen all his life.

The melodist herself hadn't won much, but hadn't lost too much either, which was nice. She was the most grateful to not be playing any other form of the game though; betting chores was more than plenty for her. The game still seemed complicated and she still had no idea if the cards she held amounted to anything or not. Looking at the fresh set in her hands, she immediately missed Luke who had turned in a couple rounds ago. What was two fives and three nines worth again?

Asch was the one really missing his twin though. For all that Luke didn't have much of a poker face, together with that CCN of theirs, they were a force to be reckoned with and they had teamed up more than once to try and take Jade down. It hadn't worked, of course, but it had thrown the rest of them for a loop. Tear looked up; the mischievous grin on Asch's face told Tear that he was fully capable of holding his own.

"It's getting late," Guy pointed out. "I think we should make this the last round."

"I agree," Ginji admitted. "Early to bed for me," he said with a chuckle, discarding his cards.

"I'm afraid I'm out this time as well," Natalia stated, placing her cards neatly down before her. Following her lead Guy also dropped out with nothing of worth in his hand.

Then the betting began. Without Natalia, a few weeks of cooking duty quickly went into the mix, along with a couple rounds of laundry, fetching wood for the fire and shopping for provisions next time they needed to resupply. Tear gave up once laundry had come into play, leaving the game between Anise, Asch and Jade.

Both Anise and Asch were analyzing each other scrupulously grasping at any hints of what the other may hold. Neither wasted a moment trying to read Jade; some things in life were just impossible, and Asch had long since learned that it was quicker and less painful to not bother
trying. Anise on the other hand had her eagerness to help her out. Despite her often shallow comments and childish nature, she was surprisingly perceptive and if the fact that she'd been a spy alone hadn't proved it, her fully deserved former position in Daath would have. She hid a lot of talent behind those sparkling eyes; hiding a hand of cards was nothing to her.

"You young ones are so energetic this late at night," Jade said with a sigh. "You make it difficult for old people like me to keep up." He neatly folded his cards into a pile and set them down. They hadn't hit the grass before an almost evil cackle escaped Anise. It wasn't often Jade dropped out of the running. In fact, it was often six against one to force him out and prevent Natalia from picking up more cooking duty.

"So," Anise began, her eyes playfully narrowed glancing at Asch menacingly from behind her cards. "Since it's the last round and it's just between us, what do you say to upping the stakes a little?"

"Oh?" Asch inquired, both intrigued by the suggestion and not quite able to back down from the challenge. "What do you have in mind? Not enough chores to do already?" Anise's smirk fell into an angry pout at the jab but quickly recovered.

"Oh yeah? Fine. If I win, you have to tell me how to tell you and Luke apart. None of the Colonel's crap about breathing and steps, I want the real way."

Asch's eyebrows raised and Anise could tell she'd caught him off guard. This was it! She was gonna finally force it out of him. Asch might know how to be a jerk but the guy had pride. He'd never go back on a deal, and if she knew him like she thought she did, he couldn't resist the challenge. Anise couldn't think of anything he could put up against her that would make her back down. Not that he was gonna win with the hand she had.

"Okay," Asch agreed. Anise felt the excitement ignite inside her. "But if I win, you have to apologize and go talk to Luke." A bucket of cold water doused her and all her enthusiasm. She could tell Asch was pleased with the shock on her face. Damn it! Leave it to him to find the one damn thing she wasn't going to do.

Anise was suddenly torn. This was her chance! Another opportunity wasn't going to come up in who knew how long! She had to have him, she had to! It was the best hand she'd had all night, she'd be damned if she gave up now! The look on his face when he lost and had to cough up his precious secret was going to be priceless!

"Better get talking," she said with a smirk as she lay her cards face up. "Four of a kind."

Asch looked at the four fives and a six that she'd set down, but Anise's heart sank when he looked back up with a wide grin. "You're the one doing the talking," he said. "Straight flush."

"Damn it!" Anise cursed.

"Hey, a deal's a deal," Asch reminded her. "He's not asleep yet."

"Shut up, I know," Anise grumbled. "Do I have to do it no-"

"Yes," Asch cut her off, almost gloating as he bathed in the satisfaction of his victory. Damn prissy, cocky, stuck-up... Anise mentally ran out of insults but sent wordless spite his way anyways.

Whatever, it wasn't like it was going to go anywhere. Anise could just say she tried and they'd all be off her back. Ball was out of her court, nothing she could do about it. Ugh... Anise stomped
through the underbrush towards the Albiore. Damn it, she was so getting back at him for this one of these days. The next thought that crossed her mind made her scowl. For the love of Yulia, at the rate she was going she was going to need one of Dist's damn journals.

"You going to give Luke a heads up?" Guy asked curiously once Anise had faded from view.

"No," Asch replied.

"That was rather mean of you," Jade said in the mock innocent voice of his.

"I could say the same for you, old man."

"Why I've no idea what you're talking about," he replied with a shrug. "I was certain you had me this round."

"Yeah right," Asch muttered.


The blond picked up the remainder of the deck and shuffled back into it Jade's royal flush.

Luke wasn't sure what to make of the unexpected knock on the door. Asch was still outside with the others around the fire. Judging from his dropped guard, the card games had finally come to a stop, something for which the redhead was mildly grateful. It was instinctive at this point: Asch being on his guard had the younger sibling on full alert, not exactly the best state to be in when trying to get some much needed shut eye. If it was Mieu asking if he could go outside again, Luke swore he would drop kick the thing halfway to Grand Chokmah. A second, more impatient knock came and Luke hopped out of bed.

Anise's head of dark brown hair was the last thing Luke expected to encounter when he opened the door, and scepticism only served to dull the dark expression that fell over him. What did she want? Anise had not kept her contempt with him a secret, nor had he hidden his displeasure with her and frankly, they'd been keeping their paths uncrossed to put it mildly. Now she had, quite literally, turned up on his doorstep.

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"What do you want?" Luke broke the silence.

"I'm here to apologize," Anise mumbled, her head still hanging. Her white fingers were fidgeting, unable to reclaim the colour from the fists in which they'd been wound.

"I'm not the one you should be apologizing to," Luke answered in an emotionless tone that shot through Anise more than the young girl had expected it to.

"Then what the hell do you want from me Luke?" Anise snapped; looking up and meeting Luke's emerald eyes through a blur of tears that she fought back with all her might. "You're the only one left I can apologize to! No one six feet in the ground gives a damn what I do or don't say!"
Luke winced at the words, though part of him wondered if it was their harshness, or the reality of Anise's situation that struck him. "It's not about the words," he threw back.

"You think I don't know what I did?" Anise asked in desperation. "You think I don't know that I murdered Arietta, that Ion is up there somewhere looking down at me in disgust? Looking at the petty and worthless little thing that I am wondering why the hell he ever gave me the benefit of the doubt? I know all that damn it, but what the hell do you want me to do about it? I can't-" Anise's voice broke with a sob and her eyes met the wooden floor again. "I can't change any of it... so just... just tell me what it is you want from me."

The feeling of Luke's warm hand on her shoulder caught Anise by surprise, and in his piercing green eyes she saw something familiar. The barrier of indifference had come down and behind it was the same sorrow she could see when she looked in a mirror.

"It's not fair!" Anise sobbed, latching onto Luke. Her arms wrapped around his waist as she drowned her tears in his black shirt. Luke gently stroked her raven locks, but it only made her hands clench tightly into fists and her cries intensified. "Don't you get it Luke! Don't you see how lucky you are?"

Luke didn't answer, he couldn't think of anything that made him lucky.

"Tataroo Valley!" Anise said. "When he healed Tear... that's the last time I was ever with him. When you let Arietta take him away, that was the last time I saw him!"

Suddenly what Anise was saying struck home. Those places, those times, they were an eternity ago. He hadn't even thought...

"He didn't deserve it," Anise managed, her voice almost a whisper. "It should have been me. After everything I'd done to him... I couldn't even protect him. I couldn't watch over him... It should have been me..."

"It wasn't your fault..." Luke whispered.

"It is!" Anise protested, but rather than fight with her, Luke just pulled her closer.

"I miss him too." Luke's pained whisper was the last words either said before allowing the silence to swallow them. The quietness however, no longer carried uncertainty or regret, just comfort, a relief from the weight that they'd both been smothered with. Burdens shared didn't seem quite so heavy and it wasn't until they were gone that either of them realized just how worn they'd become.

"You okay?" Luke asked, pulling an arm away from Anise to wipe his tears.

"Yeah," Anise sniffled, drying her eyes with her sleeve. "Could... well can I stay for a bit? You know, just until Asch gets back."

"Sure," the young noble answered with a smile.

The moon's pale light trickled in from the endless night, spilling onto the bed where the two companions sat. Under the veil of the night, they spoke, sharing laughs, tears and whispered stories well into the morning hours.

Somehow, Asch knew not to come to bed that night.

The people who lived back in the Dawn Age really needed to find something better to do with their
time. At least, that was the first thought that crossed Asch's mind when they reached the Tower of Rem. Complex, decorated and absolutely immense, the Tower of Rem was unlike anything the redhead had ever seen. No, it was more than that but the redhead would suffice to say his vocabulary lacked the words to do the structure justice. Maybe they'd had a word for it back then, or maybe it had been so commonplace that 'tall' had sufficed. But Asch had never seen anything like it, and he lived in Baticul, the tallest city in the world.

With the exception of Yulia City, the last remaining relic of the Dawn Age stood alone surrounded by ocean on all sides. How the replicas had gotten here, Asch had no idea; scratch that, he didn't want to know, nor did he want to know how many different water crafts had probably been stolen in the past couple months. But they had definitely been here, being all the way out to sea and not on any of the shipping routes, common or otherwise, the tracks and evidence of life couldn't be anyone else.

"Wow!" Guy shielded his eyes from the sun as he tried to follow the tower up until it pierced the clouds. There was no mistaking that look in his eyes; he was in full fontech mode. The worst part of the whole thing... was that he wasn't alone.

"How high do you think it goes up?" Ginji asked excitedly.

"I have no idea," Guy answered with just as much energy as the young pilot.

"I wonder if it goes up beyond the atmosphere? It was supposed to be used for a special kind of airship, after all."

"The one to try and find other worlds, right?"

"Woah, slow down you two," Anise cut in. Seriously, they were like little school girls giggling over a cute guy. "What are you talking about 'other worlds'?"

"The Tower of Rem was built to launch a ship to search for other worlds in case Yulia's plan to raise the Outer Lands failed." Asch provided.

"Sounds like someone did their homework," Jade commented.

"They could do that?" Anise asked in amazement. "I mean how did they even know there is such a thing as another world out there?"

"They didn't," Ginji answered. "It was a pretty radical plan, even with their level of knowledge and technology."

"I can't wait to see inside!" Guy almost sang.

"Me too!" Ginji agreed. Everyone looked at him, their eyes full of curiosity, scepticism and a bit of surprise. "Oh come on guys... you aren't seriously going to leave me behind while you go exploring through one of the Dawn Age's greatest accomplishments, are you?"

"Well... I mean there is a good chance that it won't be safe in there," Asch said, managing to find some words. Why of all the places they'd gone did this have to be the one time when Ginji wanted to join them? The fewer involved the better, but without any good reasons to outright deny him, the chances of Asch's victory weren't very good. "There will likely be monsters that have taken up residence and we can't say for sure that the replicas won't try to attack us."

"Asch is right," Tear agreed. "There's a good chance we could be walking into a situation we won't easily be able to escape from." Asch silently thanked the melodist.
"I'll be okay," Ginji reassured them. "I'm not as good as you guys are, but I know how to take care of myself. I won't be a burden, I promise." Asch scowled. How could anyone deny the almost puppy dog look in his eyes? He hadn't been that fired up since their first flight on the Albiore.

"We're just planning on talking," Luke said, breaking the silence. "I can keep an extra eye out for him if that's the problem. Really, if the replicas do attack, we're going to be so outnumbered that having one extra person along isn't going to make much difference."

"Yeah, you're right," Asch conceded. "Just promise me you'll be careful."

"Yes sir!" Ginji stood to attention raising a hand to his forehead in a mock salute.

"Goodness," Natalia suddenly gasped halfway up the ramp that led to two towering doors that had to be at least two stories tall.

"What's up Natalia?" Anise asked.

"I hope we don't have to take stairs all the way to the top."

An exhaustive groan escaped both Anise and Luke, to whom the thought apparently hadn't occurred either. Tear kept her thoughts to herself, though she didn't seem to relish the idea any more than her friends did. Asch secretly hoped that the task would be required and it would dissuade the others from joining him. He knew better than to cling to that hope though. Guy and Ginji probably would have swum here if it meant learning more of the tower's secrets, and Jade was... well Jade.

So it really wasn't much of a surprise that the first thing anyone noticed after getting through the doors was the massive elevator that sat in the center of the tower, an immense glass tube that climbed through a spiral staircase both that reached up further than the eye could see. The inner walls were aglow, not unlike Yulia city and there was no doubt that both locales had the same hand in designing them. Damn, was there anything in the Dawn Age that Yulia hadn't designed?

The second thing that everyone noticed, and that sent a wash of relief through them all, was that the elevator was, in fact, operational. Because the only thing crueler than taking the stairs, was taking spiral stairs, while circling an elevator you couldn't use. The whir of the massive fon machine, among what was likely many hidden ones rang in their ears. The ancient building was alive in ways Asch hadn't thought possible and it left him wondering if it had survived all these years, or if it had only recently been woken from its 2000 year slumber.

The third thing Asch noticed was the mass of replicas. It was mind boggling, and the look on his sibling's face told him Luke thought the same. They knew Mohs' had been a busy little boy all this time, but he was clearly not inefficient in his work and shutting down Feres Isle didn't seem to have done too much to dent the population. Maybe some of the shock had come from the fact that there wasn't a replica to be found outside the tower which led to the assumption that there were few of them here, but in the tower's broad base, hundreds of replicas stood patiently waiting for the elevator.

"A hundred gald says Mary's already at the top," Anise commented sarcastically. "Or whoever their leader is," she added as an afterthought.

"That's probably a safe bet," Guy agreed. "It seems to be where they're all headed."

"Then that's where we want to go," Asch stated.

"Yes but how?" Tear asked. "There's no saying how long it takes that elevator to get to the top, and
while it may be big, I doubt it holds more than a couple dozen people at once. It could take days to clear this crowd."

"I am not taking the stairs!" Anise protested violently.

"Well then let's just butt in line," Luke suggested.

"I don't know if risking getting them mad at us is a good start," Guy pointed out.

"I wouldn't worry," Jade said. "Unfortunately it looks as if the majority of the replicas here have suffered vastly from the programming that has led them here. I doubt most of them even realize we are here."

"Mohs' must be stopped," Natalia muttered.

"Yeah," Luke agreed. "This isn't right, not by any stretch of the imagination. What kind of world does Master Van think he's going to be able to build if no one is able to grow and learn?"

"Yet it is genius in its own way," Jade argued. "No strong emotions means the chance of conflict is minimal. People would be able to simply live their lives peacefully and without incident."

"But that's not living at all!" Luke shouted, biting back when he realized how loud he'd been. A few of the closest replicas turned their heads, but apparently didn't register the newest arrivals as important in any way and returned their attention to the elevator.

"I never said it was," the Malkuth Colonel replied with a shrug. "I was simply pointing out the line of thought our enemies are likely employing."

"Guys, if we're going to catch a ride the next time that thing comes down, we'd better get working on getting to the door," Anise stated.

"Yes, lets save this conversation for a later time," Natalia stated. Everyone nodded in agreement.

Getting through the crowd of replicas proved to be easier than expected, not that Jade expected it to be difficult. The replicas were in no hurry. Time didn't register as a concept to them, and so did not exist. For what was time but a human concept created to organize existence? There was of course, the odd chance that their jumping ahead could be interpreted by the replicas as an attempt to keep them from their goal, a situation where things could get ugly rather quickly, but it proved not to be the case and everyone boarded the elevator without any significant incident.

The glass walls of the enclosed space allowed for a better view of the tower as the fon machine lifted them up. There were more replicas than even Jade had anticipated and with those that were climbing the stairs, they easily numbered in the thousands. Not all would be fortunate enough to reach the top, of course. Many would likely fall victim to the monsters he also noted prowling about in the shadows. They were many in a place safe from the elements and so plentiful in easy prey.

Jade could easily see where Asch's concerns came from. If this many replicas were to suddenly appear in the cities, even dispersed across Auldrant, the economic implications alone would be tremendous. With both the disappearance of Akzeriuth, the major mineral provider, and the fall of the Outer Lands which vastly affected agriculture, it was nothing to say the world was in a very delicate state right now. It would take only half the number of replicas that were likely here to shatter the foundations of society as it existed in these troubled times. Yes, Asch had reason to worry...as did they all.
"They all seem so empty," Anise commented.

"Surely it isn't that surprising, we've met replicas like them before," the Princess pointed out.

"Yeah, but then there was that girl Luke rescued in Baticul too. I mean, why the difference? Why are all the ones here seem like the extreme end of the spectrum."

"It's simple," Jade provided. "The more information is given to them at birth, the less capacity they have to learn more. The ones here are likely those given the most; those who haven't come, like Luke's friend, aren't here because they don't know to come. To have the knowledge to come here selects out the worst cases."

"I don't know if that's a good thing or not," Ginji commented. "On one hand the ones that stay in the cities are more capable of learning what they shouldn't do, but on the other hand, with more emotion, they'll likely cause more trouble."

"A mixed blessing," Natalia said with a nod before letting out a shiver. "Is it just me or is it getting cold up here?"

"It's not just you," Guy agreed, glad he'd chosen to wear a heavier jacket this morning. "We can't be too far from the top now."

"Why is it getting colder?" Luke asked. "We're getting closer to the sun right? Shouldn't it get warmer?"

"Quite the contrary," Jade proclaimed. "In simplest terms, the air holds the heat in. The higher we are, the less there is to retain the heat, and it gets colder."


"Asch, you've been awfully quiet," Tear commented, keeping her voice down so as not to attract the others attention. She knew she'd never stand a chance of getting an answer from him if she did.

"Just thinking," he answered.

"You look like you have a lot on your mind," she offered.

"Thinking about what I have to do, that's all," he said with a smile. It was transparent though, almost sad in a way the melodist couldn't quite grasp.

"Don't worry," Tear tried. "I'm sure everything will go fine with the replicas. You negotiate well and they seem very receptive to logic. There's nothing to worry about."

"Thanks," he answered but his mood didn't seem to lighten at all. Tear felt a wave of disappointment. She wished she was better able to talk to others and to comfort them. She just never knew what to say and it always seemed to come out wrong.

But before Tear could contemplate long enough to make a second attempt at easing the worries of the older redhead, the massive lift began to slow and came to a shaky and rather noisy stop that had all of them suddenly focusing on their balance to stay standing.

Unfazed by the jolt, the replicas soundlessly filed out onto a dimly lit platform. With no other apparent direction to go in, Guy and his friends followed them out. As soon as the last person had stepped off, the lift plummeted back down its track with easily twice the speed it had used to bring them up. It was absolutely amazing! The whole tower was amazing, and even though it looked
incomplete in some places, the level of fontech that existed here was on a completely different level. Nothing they had today could even dream of being this incredible.

Excitement, it seemed, still wasn't enough to wear away the pit in his stomach and even having Ginji to talk to about his fascination with the various fon machines, didn't give him what he needed to escape. It was all a distraction, a failed one at that. Guy couldn't deny it; he was nervous about meeting Mary's replica again. He knew it wasn't really his sister, damn, he knew it better than anyone that replicas aren't their originals... but her face still trudged him through a past he hadn't been able to bury yet. He still saw a glimmering essence of the person his sister had once been, and it was enough to rip his heart out. He was glad Asch was doing the talking, he definitely didn't trust himself with words, and if there was anything that these replicas seemed to be bothered by, it was being compared to their originals.

Any hope Guy may have fostered that the young blonde leader of the replicas would be absent vanished at the sight of her golden hair. Tossed about in the cold winds, she seemed unbothered by such a petty concern as the elements, or that her clothes were completely unsuited to the temperature up here. Her only concern wasn't even the round of newest visitors that had broken through the ring of her companions. It was with the other replica cradled in her arms, beaten and bleeding and no more than ten.

Luke's hand covered his mouth to hide the disgust Guy knew had to have suddenly appeared there. He could understand; the thought of what had happened to that poor boy, for him to still be in that kind of condition even now, put bile in the former servant's mouth.

"Is he alright? What happened to him?" Tear quickly approached the boy and extended her hands to heal him, but Mary pulled him away, shielding him from her touch.

"This is how your kind treats us," she replied coldly. "He is one of us, treated as a slave and beaten near to death before being brought here. We have no place in your world."

"You're right."

"Asch!" Natalia spoke up outraged.

"No, she's right," Asch stated with an unusual degree of finality. "There isn't room, and frankly, we don't know what to do with half of you. That's why I'm here to make a deal with you."

"What would you ask of us?" Mary demanded. Wow, Anise found herself thinking, they certainly didn't waste much time with idle conversation.

"I need your help to save the rest of the world. I need you to help me eliminate the miasma."

"The miasma?" Whispers flew through Asch companions, surprised at what he was requesting. Had he come up with something? Something the replicas could do to eliminate the toxic fog? Why hadn't he mentioned anything before now? Still, the prospect of having some hope had everyone excited. Only Jade remained silent. Jade and Luke, the latter who suddenly felt like a boulder had been dropped into his stomach. He didn't like where his line of thinking was taking him, and he knew all too well the track that his brother's would have taken.

"And why should we bother to do this? We owe you nothing," Mary stated in a matter of fact tone.

"Because whether you like it or not it affects you as well. It will kill you as sure as it will kill the originals. And because I can offer you what you need."

"What is that?"
"A place in the world. If you agree, we'll ensure that all the remaining replicas will have a place to live, somewhere safe from the atrocities that are being done to them now."

A light went on in Mary's head, though it was difficult to tell through her emotionless facade, it was clear she now realized something.

"You ask for our lives," she finally said, though it wasn't a question so much as a confirmation.

"What?" Almost everyone cried out in unison, but Luke's escaped a split second sooner having come to the conclusion as Mary had. It didn't take a half second before Luke had his sibling by the collar.

"What the hell is this?" Luke demanded, boring holes in his brother's skull with his piercing glare. "What was all that crap about waiting until we'd freed Lorelei? About holding off until we had a better answer?"

"We don't have that kind of time left anymore!" Asch snapped, twisting Luke's arm and escaping his grip. "We are no closer to freeing Lorelei than we were months ago! We still don't have the Jewel and don't make me remind you whose fault that is!" Luke reeled from the blow.

Was that what this was about? Because he hadn't gotten the Jewel? That just couldn't be it! How many times had Asch told him it was okay? That it wasn't his fault... that they could work at fixing it together? Lies. All of it had been lies. He should have known... He should have frigging known Asch didn't mean any of it! That just made all this his fault! He had driven Asch to this point. Well he sure as hell wasn't going to sit back and watch it all happen. He'd spent his entire life doing that, he'd sat back and watched Akzeriuth crumble around him. He was not letting this mistake go a single step further.

"Stop this! We're talking about your life here!" Luke yelled.

"I will not just stand around and watch my country die! Unlike you, I have responsibilities, a duty to them and to all the people of this world, to do all that's in my power to protect their future. I'm the only one who can do a damn thing about it; I am not going to sit on the sidelines because you're too dense to see the big picture!"

"Then figure something else out!"

"There's no other choice, time's up. People are dying out there, Luke! Stop being the self-serving child that you are for a second and see that!"

"Stop being so damn narrow-minded! There are other choices!"

"Oh? And where do you suggest we get the Seventh fonons? Got a convenient supply stashed away somewhere or are you playing the idealist again?"

"I doesn't matter! Even if you want to go throw yourself from this tower, which feel free to do by the way," Luke added sourly. "There are thousands of replicas whose lives are in the question here."

"Better them than Seventh fonists," Asch said simply.

"You- H- H- How could you?" Luke stuttered in fury. "You-" Luke's face turned bright red stealing the colour from his snow white fists that trembled at his side. "Fine. You want to blow yourself up, go ahead. You have my blessing; but so help me Lorelei, you are not laying one finger on any of these replicas! We're freeing Lorelei or nothing's happening."
"Shut up!" Asch's blow landed cleanly across Luke's face. "You think you're so high and mighty, spouting off your ideals? Grow up! That Lorelei crap is nothing but a theory. Not that it matters, since for all we know the God-Generals already found the Jewel and smashed it to dust." No one missed the accusing glare that went Luke's way. "It's all nice that you can say those pretty things, but who the hell do you think you are? You think that Ion's the only one the miasma's taken? Are you planning on explaining to all those mothers why their children rotted away from the poison; but wait, that's right, you don't give a damn. What's ten thousand lives? You got to be the hero. But we know that already... don't we?"

The only sound that anyone heard was that of the wind as it swirled around the Tower's spirals. How could Asch...

Natalia stood in shock, Asch's sudden burst coming out of nowhere. Just a minute ago he had been completely calm and composed, now not only was he angrier than she'd seen him in a long time, but to bellow such accusations at Luke of all people was outright ludicrous. How could he even suggest that such a thing was Luke's fault? He of all people knew how awful Luke felt about not receiving the Jewel; hadn't that been why Luke had spent months buried in the books he so disliked reading? And to bring up Akzeriuth against Luke like that! There weren't words for how horrified she was at his actions just now.

The anger that had once consumed Luke was stripped bare, or rather sliced, torn asunder by all of Asch's harsh words, revealing itself to be naught but desperation. Asch knew them, all of Luke's weaknesses, the vital points where words became so much more and he had hit everyone of them. For all that only one physical hit had been delivered, Luke was crippled. He was frightened, terrified through the anguish that had visibly consumed him and if they'd learnt anything, it was that for Luke to show these emotions, he was already feeling them ten times over.

Everyone could tell that all Luke was trying to do was save Asch's life. For that was what hung in the balance here... the thought alone sent a wave of apprehension through Natalia and her knees just about buckled under her weight. Asch could never- never actually- d- die...

Luke cared for him, he was family. Luke was only trying to reason with him, and yet Asch dealt blow after verbal blow and the pain was written on her younger cousin's face for the world to see. There was no way he couldn't see it, and yet, he seemed almost triumphant, revelling in the damage he'd caused. How... how could he?


"I frankly don't give a damn what you think." Asch cut him off harshly. "You have no Jewel, we have no way to free Lorelei, and so now people are dying. End of story. Go back to your fairy tale and let the grown ups handle the real world."

Luke fell to his knees, the shock sinking in, and Asch eyed him one last time, indifference at his sibling's sudden collapse masking whatever messed up logic lay beneath it, and the young, apparently soon-to-be-dead monarch, turned his attention back to the replicas. Anise just glared at him. She didn't care what he was thinking. He was an ass.

"So," Asch continued. "What's your answer? I will promise to find a place for the remaining replicas to live, in exchange, I want the lives of the replicas here in this tower."

"You are no different than the others," Mary replied. "You ask for our lives as if they were nothing."

"I am offering my own life too," Asch stated. "I'll be going with you; I'm not doing this lightly."
"It doesn't matter," she stated, her voice never wavering or betraying any emotion. "If you wish to die, you can do so on your own. Mohs will give us all you offer and more, he will give us a place to live on the new Hod."

"You must have realized by now that you've been abandoned. I hate to be the one to break it to you, but he isn't coming back. Those promises he made are lies, he has no need of you, he just has to make more replicas. You of all people should know how easy of a task that is for him at this point."

"You lie."

"How long have you been waiting already?" Asch asked and traces of unsettlement became apparent on her face. Mary continued to cradle the replica boy in her arms.

"He will come as he has promised."

"Wait and see then," Asch answered. "There are other things I need to prepare as well. Think about what I've offered, I'll be back to make the same offer again. Have an answer for me by then."

The redhead turned around and had reached the door to the stairs before any of his companions had come out of the shock enough to follow him, or to realize that they had to go that way to get out themselves. More than one person would be perfectly happy not to see him for a millennia or two after a display like that. What- the- hell?

"You okay Luke?" Guy asked offering a hand to his best friend.

"Yeah," Luke managed, surprising Guy by how steady his voice was, and how with it he seemed. It was a peculiar thing, usually his fights with Asch had him upset, angry, sulking or just plain detached from the world. He was unusually calm for the bitter words that had flown between them. Something was off this time around, and it bothered Guy. "We better get out of here," Luke added, managing only to offer the replicas an apologetic look.

This wasn't the end of this, Luke concluded to himself as he took the first flight of stairs. Not a chance in hell was this how things would end. Let Asch be that way, things weren't going to play according to whatever twisted script he'd written out in that thick skull of his. There had to be another option, a way to get through this with everyone alive, and Luke absolutely refused to accept anything less. If Asch thought he was going to just roll over like a hurt puppy and let things go, he had another thing coming.

This meant war.
The End She Saw (Part 1)

The long walk back down the Tower of Rem's seemingly infinite staircase did a good job of redefining the term 'awkward'. No one had a clue what to say, but judging by the way they were all staring at Asch, everyone had a few words for him, kind or otherwise. So did Ginji, but like everyone else, he just couldn't figure out the proper way to start the conversation. 'So you're planning to kill yourself, huh?' just didn't quite seem appropriate. Well, he'd have a long time to think about it, if there was anything this place had, it was definitely stairs.

Taking the elevator back down hadn't proved to be as easy as catching a ride up and the massive fon machine would be gone back down before any of them could push through the replicas getting off. After a few frustrating tries, no one had the patience to continue and thus they'd begun their achingly long descent. It was easier than having to climb up the stairs at least, but the nearly palpable tension was just about as wearying. At least the time it would take to get down would give them the time they needed to blow off some steam. No conversation that started now was going to end civil.

Ginji sighed; he thought that he'd enjoy the slow decent, after all, it gave him more time in the awe-inspiring tower. Somehow, the wonders that he'd journeyed in here with his friends to witness could no longer even hold his interest. The glimmering lights, the whirring of the fon machines, the wonder of the massive Dawn Age structure didn't seem important anymore, or maybe it just didn't seem real anymore. That was it, everything that had just happened, the conversation Asch had with the replicas, his subsequent fight with Luke... the entire thing had dropped the pilot into this sea of surrealism. Like a vivid dream he couldn't quite wake from, there was a detachment, a disbelief in what he was experiencing. He couldn't bring himself to accept it as reality. Ginji almost chuckled at his thoughts, their abstract nature beating around the bush. He knew darn well he was in denial. There just wasn't any way he would really lose one of his best friends like that, was there?

Looking at Asch, silently walking beside the pilot, pretending to be oblivious to the attention focused on him, there was a harsh stab of truth on his face; a morbid resolve that lingered there in all its prescience. He'd planned this all out, and he had no intentions of changing his mind anymore. He really intended to go through with this... didn't he? Ginji just didn't get it... people didn't just throw away their lives like that. It didn't make any sense; and if he knew anything of his friend, it was that he was logical. Everything, well almost everything, he did was thought out; if Asch was resorting to something so drastic... he must be backed into a corner. That was, unless doing this was part of a larger plan that wouldn't travel to the dark ends on which it seemed to be heading. Of that, Ginji fervently hoped.

A frustrated scowl escaped next to the pilot, startling him from his thoughts. Asch'd had enough of the accusing and remorseless stares on his back and stormed ahead of the group taking the stairs two at a time until he was almost a quarter rotation ahead of them. No one made any motion to try and catch up, nor did they look like they were considering it. If anything the space seemed welcome and the whispers began not far behind his departure. It wasn't fair to Asch; not at all. Ginji hurried ahead as well.

"Say... Asch?" Ginji began hesitantly. Asch didn't make a sound but the small flicker of his eyes at the young pilot was enough to know he had the redhead's attention. "Did you really mean the things you said up there? I mean... are you really planning to sacrifice yourself and those replicas?"

"Yeah," Asch answered, surprised to find words at his lips. He had fully intended not to say a damn
thing about it, no matter what anyone accused him of... but the lack of judgement in Ginji's voice broke through his resolve.

"But...why?" Ginji waited in silence as Asch seemed deep in thought. He was thinking very carefully about what he wanted to say. If it wasn't about such an awful subject it would have made Ginji smile. He was always so cautious... even around the people he trusted.

"I really wish we had another way," the young noble hesitantly admitted. "But there isn't, not one that we'll be able to find in time. I can't watch people start to die when there's still something I can do about it. I just can't. I'm the only one who can do this. I can't do nothing."

"What about Lu-"

"I'm the only one who can do this." Asch cut Ginji off before the thought had even completed itself.

"That's why you got so mad at Luke, wasn't it?" Ginji smiled, Asch's train of thought finally clicking. He'd found the logic.

"No!" Asch violently protested, his voice filled with enough bitterness to have fooled the pilot had he not known his friend better than that. "I'm sick of him being a baby. He needs to learn that sometimes dirty things have to be done. He doesn't have the privilege of being ignorant," Asch stated with finality, adding to his point by walking ahead. Ginji followed but Asch didn't make any attempt to lose him again.

Damn it all, why? Asch silently cursed the silver-haired pilot, even though he knew full well Ginji wasn't the problem. To be perfectly honest, he was mildly grateful for his understanding presence among the others, but it did little to soothe his irritation. Why did everyone always know what he was thinking? Why was it, no matter what he did, he couldn't escape them anymore? Asch focused on his breathing; he couldn't afford to let his frustration come through now. He had to stay clear-minded, he had to be objective about this. He didn't want to do this; he didn't want to murder thousands of replicas! He... he didn't want to die. But there weren't any other options left anymore and delaying the inevitable was only going to leave them with more people dead. Besides, it was his duty to watch over his people. He would die to protect the world. It was a noble way to go... but it didn't make it any easier. So why the hell did everyone seem so intent on making it difficult? Asch just wanted them to stay away; not to be angry, or upset or judgmental, but to not give a damn at all. He needed them to stay away so he wouldn't be reminded of what he was losing, of what he was giving up... because if he thought on it too long, he may start to think it wasn't worth it.

He had to stay detached. He had to stay objective.

And that meant no one was allowed to get close... no matter how much a small part of him screamed inside.

But next to the piece of him that cried out for the companionship Asch never thought he'd want, there was a small seed of guilt that was starting to sprout. The things he'd said to Luke were all so clear, and the longer those thoughts had to fester the sharper their edges seemed. It was surprising how much crueler he could be when given time to think about it, when he'd planned the words and their spiteful blows before the fact. It was necessary. For to Luke, wanting to sacrifice himself, to sacrifice the replicas for the miasma had to be the most repulsive idea possible... because Asch knew that if it wasn't, Luke would take his place in a heartbeat. That above all else, couldn't be allowed.

This was for the future of the world, but more than for that, he was doing this for Luke's future, for
Natalia's future. Sure Luke was still pretty awkward in court affairs, but he'd come such a long way. Given a few more years he'd fit right in as if he'd been born to belong there. He'd come into his own this past year, and Asch couldn't be more proud of him. Luke would do just fine. Natalia... she would take it hard, but she would persevere if only for her country. She'd find someone who'd treasure her above all else, even the fate of the planet, someone who deserved her kindness and affection and had earned her love through his deeds and not his birthright. The hole he left behind would eventually fill in. Luke would leave an inescapable chasm that no one would recover from.

It had to be him.

'Luke-

'Don't even talk to me right now!' Luke snapped at Asch's voice before it'd gotten half a thought conjured. Even though it was only over their connection, Luke's very thoughts quivered with rage.

Asch immediately backed down, closing himself off to the heated emotions Luke rolling off his sibling. He'd known that was coming... it was what he'd wanted and Asch knew that he knew Luke's buttons well enough not to have created any other outcome. Why, then, did he find himself so hurt by Luke's reaction?

Hope. A small corner at the back of his mind had clung to the hope that Luke would understand, would know him well enough to see that all this was for them; that Asch wanted nothing more than to give them a world in which they could have a future. But he hadn't seen it... none of them had. No, Asch shook off the thought. Things were better this way. It may be more difficult, but this was what he'd wanted from the beginning. Detached. Objective.

If Luke hated him, it would just make it that much easier on him when he was gone.

Asch sighed sadly.

And so the last of his days had begun.

It took them the better part of three hours to take the stairs all the way down the tower and the trek, though downwards and with a helping hand from gravity, still had them worn out. Guy didn't want to fancy how long the journey up would have taken. At least double the time, without a doubt. It was a good thing their first pass at the steps was going down and not up; had they tried to take them up, Guy doubted they'd have made it. The set of stairs that climbed the top half of the Tower had been blocked off by some stray debris; they never would have found their way through coming from the other side.

Guy almost felt dirtied for clearing the path. Now the replicas who had chosen to climb the stairs had a clear way up to the top. To their altar. Guy wanted to hate Asch, to punch him for the sheer stupidity of even suggesting what he had, but the fault wouldn't lie all with him. He'd only given the replicas a choice. If they walked that path, it would be because they willed it. He bit his lip. Part of him didn't care about that. He couldn't watch his sister die again...

The miasma seemed thicker closer to the ground, and maybe it was simply that he knew what Asch had in the works, but it seemed unusually dense. It has reached the point where it was actually hampering visibility, something Guy hadn't seen it do since they'd visited the Qliphoth. It didn't seem to be getting in the replica's way at all, and a fresh crowd of them was making their way into the tower as they were leaving it. Poor Mieu had to be quick on his feet to avoid being trampled and very quickly found himself a perch on Luke's shoulder. Poor little thing; the way he was excitedly proclaiming how he'd almost been stepped on would have Luke on his case for a bit.
Mieu had a serious lack of ability to tell when someone's patience was dangerously thin. Then again it had been Mieu who'd served as Luke's distraction almost the entire way down. Between the little cheagle and Tear, Luke hadn't had too much time to dwell on what had just happened. Good or bad, Guy wasn't sure, it would definitely hit him later... but at least for now the blow could be somewhat softened.

Two shapes coming through the toxic fog caught the Malkuth noble's eye and he froze, not unlike his companions who'd also taken note of them. Standing out from the replicas that staggered along, their stride was smooth, almost graceful compared to the others among which they were walking. Great. Just great, this was exactly what they needed. Guy may not have been able to see them clearly yet, but there was only one person they knew of that stature.

"It's time," Largo stated, coming to halt before the group. Sync stood at his side, a cocky look on his face despite the fact that he looked like a small child standing next to his companion like that. That satisfied grin of his only ever meant trouble... and lots of it. "Time you show us where you've hidden the Seventh Fonstone."

Asch stood silent for a moment, trying to catch up to his thoughts. He'd known this was coming, maybe not quite so soon, but that it would be in the near future. Asch would have been perfectly happy to leave Mohs to rot in whatever rat hole he'd hidden himself and his New Order in but this was inevitable and he knew it. What bothered him was how the hell the God-Generals had known to find them here. He hadn't even told Uncle where he planned to go. Was Mohs still watching the replicas? Did he still have something in mind for them after all? That could pose a huge problem. Asch shook his head. No... that couldn't be right. Even if he was and had notified Sync and Largo immediately upon their arrival, there was no way the God-Generals could have gotten here that fast. They had to have known well before that...well before he'd told a soul of his intentions.

"You look surprised," Sync taunted. "You think we were going to give you time to try and weasel your way out like you always do? Well you're not getting out of it this time. If you go back on our deal, we'll tell the world you've been supporting illegal fomicry experiments."

"How did you find us here?" Asch asked as calmly as he could.

"It's amazing what you can learn from the flow of information," Sync baited the redhead.

Damn it! They were watching the Dark Wings! Asch cursed under his breath. He should have known, especially since he had them searching for the Jewel, no doubt the God-Generals not only would have heard of their efforts, but kept a close watch on them in case they had found it. Did that mean they didn't have the Jewel of Lorelei yet either?

"Well?" Sync prodded them. "No more putting it off, we go now or we issue an official protest against Kimlasca."

"Fine," Asch spat bitterly. His eyes darted around, looking for the former Grand Maestro. This was the time when he usually appeared to gloat about his victory. He must have stayed on the ship. Damn, so much for that quick end to all this.

"How are we going to do this?" Guy asked. "I doubt either of us trusts the other enough to travel together."

"Hmph, I'm insulted," Sync said tauntingly. "You've the faster ship; tell us where to meet you."

"No," Asch protested, alarms going off in his mind at the God-General's suggestion. "We'll meet at a different location and travel together from there."
"Where are we to meet you then?" Largo asked.

Asch sighed and gave it a moment's thought. He needed a crossroads, a place that could lead to many locations. "Meet us on the Kimlascan side of Kaitzur in one week. That should give you enough time to get there."

"Ah," Largo replied. "You've hidden it away in Choral Castle."

"You don't think we're that stupid, do you?" Asch shot.

"You don't want an answer to that," Sync shot back.

"Kaitzur, one week," Largo interrupted, "If you fail to be there, you know what the consequences will be." Without another word, he turned and left heading towards the water where they must have docked their craft. Sync sent one last cocky grin before following his comrade.

"They figured that out a bit too fast for my liking," Guy commented once he was sure they were out of an earshot. "They must have been doing some searching of their own since we took it."

"I have a bad feeling about this," Tear confessed, following the others towards the Albiore. They didn't have much time to waste. They had to hurry and warn the guard there. The military of both countries were well trained, but she doubted they could stand up to both God-Generals and whatever other forces Mohs would undoubtedly bring with him. "I don't like that they know where the Seventh Fonstone is."

"Even if they do, Sync had a point," Asch stated calmly.

"Yeah," Ginji agreed. "The Albiore is faster than anything they've got. Even on the fastest ship it'll take them at least three or four days. The average ship will take closer to seven."

"We'd best head straight there, none-the-less," Natalia commented. Sitting down in one of the Albiore's seats, she felt ready to lose the small lunch they'd consumed earlier. Undoubtedly a result of recent events, but she would set that aside for the time being. They had the matter of Mohs and the Fonstone to deal with and that would require her entire focus. The ludicrousness of Asch's plan would have to wait for the time being.

"I'll have us there in a day," Ginji answered with a certainty that meant he probably didn't intend on sleeping tonight.

"Perhaps it would be wise to split into two groups," Jade pondered. "In case they intend to send advance forces to Choral Castle."

"Well there is the Kimlasca and the Malkuth guard there," Tear pointed out. "Assuming the advance forces doesn't contain one of the God-Generals, they should be able to hold off Mohs' forces."

"I imagine they would both remain to protect Mohs," Natalia said. "They undoubtedly see that his death would be our easiest solution, they won't leave him unguarded."

"They could always send a third to Choral Castle," Guy pointed out.

"I can't see my brother lending so much of his forces, especially since Mohs' objective is reading the Score."

"But it was Master Van who brought the Fonstone back from the core in the first place, wasn't it?"
Luke spoke up. "Maybe he has something else in mind for it other than just to manipulate Mohs. We shouldn't let our guard down."

"Luke's right," Natalia agreed. "If the soldiers can't stop them, then all the guards' presence will do is confirm to Mohs that their initial guess was correct. There wouldn't be any reason to have a guard there otherwise."

"We'll get there first," Asch replied. "It won't matter."

"Damn it!" Ginji cursed and before anyone knew what had happened, he'd flown out of the Albiore. Everyone's gaze met for a second, their hearts sinking at the blue and silver blur that had just bolted out the door.

Before Tear's hair had even settled from the small breeze Ginji's dash had created, she and all her friends were out the door after him. What could possibly be going on? She hadn't seen Ginji that worked up since the attack on Sheridan. The implications of that reference sent chills up the melodist's spine. It couldn't possibly be something that bad, could it?

Outside, they found Ginji standing on the opposite side of the Albiore, only his blue jacket visible, half hidden as he was behind one of the landing devices whose name Tear could never remember. Walking below the massive airship always left her a little nervous, but it was the fastest way over there and the urgency in Ginji's voice still resonated with her rapid heartbeat. They ran below the Albiore to their pilot's side.

The first feeling that crossed Tear's mind was relief that no one was dying, but it was quickly overwhelmed by dread as the implications of the problem sank in. It was fruitless to ask what was wrong, even with her limited knowledge of fon machines, she could tell they wouldn't be leaving any time soon. One of the hatches was torn right open with what looked suspiciously like a massive scythe, and metal parts littered the ground. Wires hung loosely from the opening, sending the occasional spark into the air. Tear glanced up into the ship's inner workings; there she saw even more pieces hanging and strewn about what looked like...

"Is that..." Tear asked.

"The engine," Guy answered.

Ginji was almost quivering. "That stupid, good for nothing son of a bitch! How dare he! I'm gonna kill him!" The pilot shouted into the miasma filled sky. Everyone stepped back; they had never heard their quiet, mild-tempered pilot swear like that. Then again, no one had ever dared to touch his baby.

"What's your best assessment of the damage?" Jade asked calmly.

"It was definitely Sync," Ginji stated bitterly. "Largo never would have fit, and he definitely went up in there. I won't know the full extent of what the bugger did until I get up there myself."

"Can you fix it?"

"Yes, but it's going to take me a few days. At least two, maybe three."

"I don't mean to be rude or anything," Asch spoke up. "But where's Noelle? Could she give us a lift while you work on repairs?"

"Last I heard from her, she was taking some friends on a shopping trip in St. Binah," Ginji provided. "It'll take her just as long, if not longer to get here and that's if we can get her on the
transmitter right now."

"We'll wait then," Guy stated. "I can help with repairs too."

"Thanks," Ginji nodded. "I'll need all the help I can get." Ginji then burst into a list of supplies and tools for Guy to fetch that only the blond would have been able to remember much less identify. The silver haired pilot put himself to work immediately.

"Damn it!" Asch cursed.

"Well this explains why Sync wanted us to divulge the location under the presumption we'd get there first," Natalia said.

"That little bastard, I'm going to kill him," Ginji muttered as he worked.

"If the opportunity arises, he's all yours," Asch tossed in comfortingly.

"Three days," Jade said with a sigh. "Let us fervently hope that the God-Generals don't beat us there."

It was such a small thing. The glistening fonstone sat innocently in Luke's palm, easily hidden by his weakly clenched fist. In his hand, its weight was nothing, but the desperate young noble felt its burden on his shoulders, its weight bearing in his stomach threatening to make him sick for the second time today. He stared at it, first angrily and then pleading, but the small rock would not be revealing any of its secrets quite so easily.

Luke punched the wall, the metal echoing undoubtedly all the way up to the cockpit but no one would come to investigate the reverberating sound; they'd stopped coming down after the fifth time. They'd also stopped trying to console him. How could they when none of them even knew what the hell the problem was? Pain resounded in his hand like the deep echo of the wall in his ears. It was a welcome distraction, but it was too short lived. Everything crashed down on him again before the ache had even faded. The pain still helped him focus; he had to get this figured out. Luke took a deep breath and started again.

The change of scenery hadn't helped his temperament much, and the bunks in the room he now shared with Guy had taken much abuse because of it. Jade had been the one to offer Luke a swap, and while the redhead was grateful, he was sure it had more to do with Jade wanting to keep an eye on the giant irresponsibility that was his older brother. Jade would want to be there to be sure Asch didn't try anything. Luke was all too happy to take him up on that offer too; the less he had to think about what Asch said up there... what Asch wanted to do to all those replicas, the better.

Damn it all, no! Luke felt the fonons he'd gathered slip through the cracks of his faltered concentration. He couldn't afford to think about that, to think about Asch now. He had to focus or he'd never figure this out! This had to be it... Luke was backed into a wall; he didn't know what else to do. So he was betting everything on Ion's final gift to him. There had to be something in this that could help him. If there was a way to save everyone, a way that the replicas didn't have to die... that Asch didn't have to... if there was a way he could save everyone then he didn't care if it meant going back to the Score. It had come to this because of him, because he hadn't gotten the Jewel from Lorelei like he should have. In all Asch's musings that one fact was completely true. If it ended the way Asch wanted it... all those lives... Asch's life... that blood would all be on his hands. He couldn't let that happen, no matter what it meant.

No matter what.
"Hey Luke," Guy said softly as he opened the door. Luke carefully slid the fonstone back into his pocket, using his other hand to wipe the water from his eyes, knowing full well which hand would garnish his best friend's attention. Guy tried to smile. "Ginji asked me to put in a request that you not disassemble the Albiore any further or you might have to share the same fate Sync will someday."


The smile was welcome and Guy was glad to see he could still coax one from his best friend. Rough didn't even begin to describe how Luke looked. He looked wasted, like he hadn't slept in days, and if that were the case, Guy wouldn't be surprised. He'd stayed as alert as he could these past few nights, but Luke, at least, didn't give off any indication of having fitful sleep. Not that he'd blame his best friend if he did. Sadly, the months they had spent apart had put a bit of a wedge between the two that left the blond uncomfortable. Luke had done a lot of growing, and Guy hadn't been there; he didn't know some of these new tendencies of Luke's and that left him feeling a little helpless. He missed the familiarity they'd once had between them.

Guy knew there was something going on, after all, no person with any sense whatsoever wouldn't be bothered by some of the things Asch had said. He'd dug up some old unwanted memories and Guy couldn't even begin to express how royally pissed he was with Asch. Getting mad at Luke was one thing, but to rip open Akzeriuth of all things. How dare he.

"I'll try to keep that in mind," Luke answered.

Guy sighed and shook his head, reaching for one of his packs and pulling something from its depths. "Honestly, look at you, you're making a mess of yourself." Luke suddenly recognized the item Guy had grabbed as bandages, and then he noticed his fist was bleeding.

"If you're going to turn something into a punching bag, I've a few better options in mind," Guy commented as he began wrapping up Luke's hand.

"Like what?"

"Your brother."


"It's a bit messy," Guy professed. "I'm sure either of the girls would be more than happy to fix you up."


"You doing okay?" The former servant asked.

"I've been better," Luke confessed with a small chuckle and his response took a huge weight from Guy's shoulders. If Luke had lied to him, if he'd said that he was fine, Guy wasn't quite sure what he would have done. It bothered him enough knowing just how beyond his reach Luke was at times.

"Okay, stupid question," Guy admitted, taking a seat on the bed where he was joined by his best friend. Both of them leaned back against the wall.

"Yep."
"Oh don't give me that, you can't say you didn't ask stupid questions."

"When I was a kid," Luke protested.

"You're still a kid, you know," Guy reminded him. "Seven is hardly old enough to be called an adult."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Don't forget that," Guy emphasized with a playful elbow. "You don't have to deal with all this crap on your own."

"I can't dump everything on others, I have to be able to do some things on my own too, you know."

"Sheesh, you could have saved me a lot of trouble if you'd realized that a few years ago."

The young noble chuckled but his expression quickly faded. "Guy... do you ever wish you hadn't spent all those years at our manor?"

"Whoa, where did that come from all of a sudden?"

"Well, you're a Malkuth noble," Luke explained. "I look at everything you have now and I can't help but think you would have been happier. I mean, I was always so demanding, I never really thought about how hard it must be for you at all."

"Well you weren't all that bad," Guy said with a sly grin but his little tease didn't lighten Luke up any. "Yeah sure I could have gone back to Malkuth, but where would that have that gotten me? It's not like I had any family to go back to. There all I would have done is sit around and mull about my revenge surrounded by nothing but my hatred for your father. Who knows where I would have would have ended up. Sure working at your manor didn't start out for the right reasons... but it became different. You guys became my family."

"Really?"

"Seeing Mary's replica made me think about things, about the choices I've made. Cantabile once told me that I'd abandoned my sister when I gave up on trying to avenge her, but I don't think that's true anymore. She would have wanted me to be happy and I know that she would have wanted me to meet you. She wouldn't have wanted to see me as that miserable and spiteful child I otherwise would have been. So while I might have had a bit of a tougher life in order to have known you, I'd still do it again. And I'll find a way to pay you back for what you did for me."

"What are you talking about?" Luke asked confusedly. "I'm the one who owes you so much!"

Guy simply shook his head. "You're the one who changed my mind... about Asch, about your father... and even about the replicas. I won't look at Mary's replica as my sister anymore, it isn't fair to either of us. Even though she's a different person than my sister, I think there's still an essence of the person she once was in there. So I think I'd like the chance to get to know her better, for who she is. I think to some extent all the replicas are that way, they hold in them a small piece of the person they once were."

Luke's face darkened a little. "So... you think I'm the same as Asch is?"

"I don't like the idea that much either right now, but yeah, I do think there's a small element to you that's the same. You may not see it, I never used to, but I do now. You both have kind hearts, you both have that same stubborn pride... and you both always keep a front on, whether it's your goofy
smile or Asch's silence, you both hide when you're in pain to keep people from worrying, even if all it does is make us worry more."

"But-

"But!" Guy cut Luke off. "Unlike Asch, you have a head attached to those shoulders that you are fully capable of using."

Luke chuckled in spite of himself. He'd forgotten how good Guy was at making him feel better.

"I'm not saying you're the same person, after all, you each have your own experiences, your own unique set of perspectives and ideals, and your own talents. Everyone has their own path in life; yours just intersect more than most people's do."

"I..." Luke began hesitantly, "I can't let Asch go through with this."

"I know you can't," Guy replied comfortingly. "We can't let him do this."

"Guy..."

"We'll figure something out together, don't you worry! Don't forget, we've got Jade's brains on our side, and Asch hasn't got anything on that!"

Luke smiled, a genuine smile, and the weight on his chest began to lift a little.

"Guy... Thank you."

Choral Castle loomed heavily over the horizon, the setting sun behind it casting a steadily growing darkness over the gates where Tear and her friends stood. She didn't like it, things seemed far too quiet. Thoughts of ghosts and hauntings came to mind, of course they would, who wouldn't think of such things in an abandoned manor like this? But Tear swept them aside; she had been here before and there were no such things anyways. They had to stay alert and stay focused. The lack of sound spoke of things far worse than her petty childhood fears.

Ginji had made record time, getting them here in just over a day, but after taking into account the time it took him and Guy to repair the engine, four days had elapsed since their meeting with the God-Generals. They'd made a pass over Kaitzur but didn't see anyone waiting or even the signs of any forces beyond the border guard. Not taking any chances, they flew straight here. Once they'd confirmed the fonstone was still secure, a group could go meet their adversaries. That was the plan, but Tear doubted it was going to be necessary. There was no question in her mind that this was where Mohs would be. Even within the building things were unusually silent, and with both Kimlascan and Malkuth guards supposed to be stationed here, quiet was a very bad thing. They should at least hear the sounds of the men who weren't on duty, whispers from an upper room, someone snoring... something, but all sound was absent.

Tear wasn't the only one on full alert, everyone was. Seven pairs of eyes and one cheagle darted about, looking for any sign of Oracle Knights or of the God-Generals. Everything about this screamed 'trap'; here where they were supposed to have the upper hand. Everyone was hesitant to move towards the basement. Passing through there was the only way to get to the Seventh Fonstone on foot, but there was also the chance that the enemy was waiting and watching to see where they would go. Running straight to the prize would be foolish.

Unfortunately, splitting up would be even more foolish, and while it would be the perfect way to lose an enemy that was likely few in number, if the God-Generals were here, and they undoubtedly
were, alone each of them would be easy pickings, especially Asch who still held the Sword of Lorelei.

"We don't have time to linger, trap or not," Jade finally stated. "They could have just as easily followed the guard there."

Of course! Tear was one of the first through the doors and onto the steps that took them down to the basement, berating herself the whole way for not thinking of that sooner. How easy would it have been to wait for the shifts to change and follow the men from whatever quarters they were staying in right down to the Fonstone? The presence of the guard in the first place would have confirmed it was here. Especially with both countries present, the soldiers' presence couldn't even be mistaken for an act of war.

The old fomicry facility came up faster than Tear had remembered it being, and still it took her breath away. There was a strange sense of dread that seemed to linger here. A dimness and darkness that clung to anyone who entered it sent an unwilling shiver down her spine.

She knew what this room was now, learned its secrets when they'd been here to hide the Seventh Fonstone in the first place. The machines that had once seemed foreign to her, she'd recognized immediately and the horror of what that meant had sunk in deeply. Those feelings now resonated with the room itself. This is where her brother had taken Asch.

This was where Luke had been born.

"C-C - Colonel... Curtiss..." A broken whisper brought them all across the room. The Malkuth soldier sat crippled on the ground, an arm soaked in blood covering an irreparable wound across his abdomen. Next to him the Kimlascan guard lay crippled, his throat slashed. Both wounds looked fresh; they weren't far behind the intruders.

"Here, hold still," Tear instinctively dropped to the man's side. "I'll heal your wounds."

"Save your strength Tear," Jade commanded. "He is beyond your skill to mend."

"Th-Thank you," The soldier managed.

"Who did this?" Jade asked.

"It... it was... ord...lo..." The name was lost on the man's last breath, but the culprit remained, for them, beyond question. This was it, Mohs had to be stopped.

Tear gently pulled the man's eyes closed, biting back the grief and the anger that came with watching anyone die. It always came, no matter how much she knew it was foolish and naive of her to believe she could save everyone. Her healing skills came with limits, and those limits left her with a strange burden.

"Come along," Jade emphasized. "It seems we've arrived a bit too late."

Jade was absolutely right and Tear pulled herself to her feet with grace and matched her companion's strides. Mohs had to be stopped; he had to be made to see the reality of what he was doing. What worried Tear was that she knew the truth of the matter already. Mohs could see what he did, he knew full well the severity of his deeds, but in his eyes it was worth it. He was making sacrifices that weren't his to make, for a prosperity that was no longer within reach.

The passage to the courtyard where the Seventh Fonstone lay, at least, where it hopefully still lay, was littered with more of the casualties that Tear had seen in the fomicry lab. Her sinking heart
lightened a bit at the realization that not all the men were dead. All were injured to some extent but a great many of them were just unconscious. Some of Tear's anxiousness lifted and she only regretted not being able to stop and help them. They would be alright, she could well remember the first aid training she'd received and though she'd received private lessons from Major Legretta, she doubted such an important skill would be omitted from any other student's tutelage.

All she asked was that they'd arrive in time. That they could prevent the worst of the damage... as it stood there were going to be political implications; there had been too many casualties on both sides for there not to be, especially with an escapade supposedly approved by Kimlasca that Malkuth knew nothing of. Mohs knew how to multi-task, Tear would give him that. If she could ask Yulia for anything... it would be to end all this. Mohs, her brother, settle it all so they could open their way to the future. Whatever future they would chose.

"Do you guys ever wonder?" Anise asked as they ran along the last few hallways.

"Wonder about what?" Tear inquired.

"Wonder what it was Yulia saw. What's written on the Seventh Fonstone," Anise explained. "I know it probably doesn't matter anymore and everything, but I still wonder sometimes. What's at the end of that path? What did she learn that made her take the stone and hide it personally?"

"That is something," Jade replied. "That unfortunately, we may be about to find out."
The courtyard was exactly as Tear had remembered it, now dangerously dim as the last of the sun's rays vanished from the horizon. Clouds began to move in, covering the navy heaven beyond the miasma filled sky, hiding the stars that would be invisible regardless, their faint light no longer able to pierce the toxic fog that had settled over the planet. Tear remained uneasy but thankfully she didn't have much time to worry. At least half of the Malkuth and Kimlascan forces that were stationed along the corridors had already been killed, a confirmation as good as any that Mohs and the God-Generals had beat them here. Asch was still on a vendetta to get rid of the miasma which involved taking himself and about 5000 replicas with it and her brother was still bent on destroying the world as they knew it. Yes, Tear was glad she didn't have the time to think about any of these problems in depth. They were in the midst of a battle they couldn't afford to lose, from this point on it was a matter of reaction and of protecting those dearest to her. For now, nothing else mattered.

Jade sent a burst of fifth fonons around the area, igniting the fonstones that had been set around the last time they were here and giving the entire yard an eerie feel. In the center the Seventh fonstone reflected the dim light, shimmering in a rainbow of colours, the single prize. No one spent any time dwelling on the atmosphere; the light gave way to the chaos of the struggle that had been taking place under the veil of darkness. The entire scene lay out before them, like a bloody painting telling a sombre tale.

Kimlasca's general stood backed against a wall, blood running down her cheek from an injury somewhere in her blonde tangles. Her sword was drawn but not sullied; the only crimson to be seen was in her uniform. Her mouth hung open mid-scream.

General Frings took the blow for his Kimlascan counterpart, crippling under Sync's strike, his silver hair was stained and his arm now hung at an angle that shouldn't be possible. His sword lay useless on the ground several feet away gleaming in the light of the new-lit fonstones; clean, neither General had put so much as a scratch on their opponent.

The frozen tableau exploded with the crunch of shattered bones as Frings met the stone wall. Cecille's scream echoed off the walls, the world suddenly came back to life and the spilt second that lasted a minute came to a shattering halt.

"Well well, look who finally decided to show up," Sync taunted noticing the group's presence. Tear wasted no time placing herself between the God-General and his opponents, a motion in which everyone followed suit. Carefully daring to steal a moment's attention, she glanced over her shoulder to assess Frings' condition. His left arm and leg both looked broken and there was a good chance he had a concussion, but he'd live if they could get him out of this alive.

"Take him and get to a safe location," Jade commanded the young Kimlascan General. She eyed them all cautiously.

"My orders were to guard this fonstone with my life if need be," Cecille protested. Her argument seemed half-hearted, her attention was still with her fallen comrade.

"Wh-What's the meaning of this?" Frings demanded, trying to pull himself up, only earning him a wave of pain that he restrained behind a bit lip. Cecille ran to his side.

"I could ask the same," Sync shrugged, seemingly pleased at the mess he'd made of Frings. "We just came as per our agreement and we were attacked."
"It was agreed by both countries that this Score would never be read for the sake of either of them!" Frings went into a fit of coughing.

"General Frings," Jade stated with an authority far beyond his station and one Tear had heard him use with them on occasion. It was a tone he wasn't particularly fond of taking, but one to which no person with any sense would dare disobey. "Take General Cecille, gather what men remain and retreat."

"Colonel Curtiss-

"I ask for your trust in this matter."

A pause of silence as Frings stared Sync down. "Alright," the General conceded, and with help from Cecille he left the courtyard. Tear only regretted not being able to fix him up a little, but broken bones required time and concentration to heal, of which she could afford neither right now. She would just have to leave him in Cecille's capable and seemingly willing hands.

"Tell your friends that they can join us now," Jade said harshly to Sync.

"Just waiting on the guest of honour," Sync answered mockingly.

Largo stepped out from the shadows across the courtyard dwarfing the man who walked next to him. Still dressed in the traditional garb from his former position of Grand Maestro, he took little notice of the God-General who loomed over him. Jade's curiosity was piqued by his clothes, the attitude and overinflated ego he wore being of little interest to the Colonel. He wondered why Mohs would choose his old uniform when there was little doubt all such things would have been taken from him when he lost his position in the Order. It was a message he wished to declare, a subtle detail that despite the man's preposterousness he had given some thought to. He was declaring his superiority, that the former Order's rulings held no power over him.

Mohs' eyes met his only once and the small beady things darted away, though they scanned everyone, making misjudged assessments. Jade could care less, the more he underestimated them, the greater their window of opportunity would be. The self-proclaimed Fon Master bore a drawn out grin, victory already in his grasp; he was a man who saw an end.

"The Seventh Fonstone," Mohs hovered over his prize, Jade watched him cautiously. There was no room for error, no time for mistakes. Though he may be a fool, his two guards were not and though the God-Generals' and Mohs interests didn't coincide in the least, there was no knowing how long they could find use in their figurehead. Until they were through with whatever purpose he served them, they would defend him and that was what posed the threat. Them and the handful of Oracle Knights Mohs thought he still had hidden in the shadows. Jade waited; the opportunity would come as soon as Mohs had Sync read him the Score.

"With this, I'll overtake the shattered remains of that fool's Order!" Mohs continued his monologue, oblivious as to whether or not anyone was even paying attention. "I'll create a new, proper Order that will devoutly follow the Score. All that remains to report this to the authorities. Kimlasca's soldiers heartlessly slaughtered Malkuth's in an attempt to secure the Score for themselves. It shouldn't be long before war begins anew."

"And what do you hope to achieve by that?" Natalia demanded.

"The world has strayed from Yulia's Score and look at the disaster's that have befallen us. We were foolish, arrogant in believing that we knew better than she." Asch scoffed making no attempt to hide his contempt; funny to hear Mohs calling another arrogant. "It is my responsibility as Fon
Master to take this Score and deliver it to the world. That is the purpose of the New Order of Lorelei!"

"Sorry to break it to you but no one wants the world you're offering," Asch challenged him, drawing his sword. Jade drew his spear, knowing that the aggression was bound to come, but just because Asch had a death wish didn't mean he had to be quite so reckless. The rest of them still had his mess to clean up. "They don't need you and they don't need your Score; we won't let you ruin what they've worked so hard to create."

Asch hadn't taken half a step before the Oracle Knights swarmed out and the young monarch stopped in his steps. Jade watched him with a smidge of satisfaction that he'd missed the extra forces in his hurry to end the situation. Even Luke had spotted them lurking, though he'd likely underestimated their numbers, he'd still been aware of their presence. Mohs' satisfaction went up a few notches.

"Want to go back on your word?" Sync asked, his cocky pose having melted away to one ready for battle. "If you do we won't be keeping our end of the deal."

"It won't matter much if we shut you up for good," Asch shot back.

"I will create a new world!" Mohs declared. "A world that Yulia would have been proud of, one that she will smile down upon and not curse with her poison; no one can stop me!"

"And what is our place in this world?"

The familiar monotonous voice caught them all off guard. Jade turned his head, his ruby eyes rapidly assessing Mary and the half dozen replicas that she'd pulled with her from the shadows. This was an unexpected factor and one Jade honestly hadn't expected to see come into play. The technicalities of their presence here, how they'd arrived was swept to the back of his mind for the time being. A puzzle he could mull over later if he cared to, for now he was more concerned about their objectives. The Oracle Knights didn't pose much threat; the God-Generals would be the challenge. If the replicas were fighting against them, this would be almost impossible.

"Perfect!" Mohs grin erupted at the sight of the replicas. "Hurry up and kill these fools who dare try to stand in the way of our new world."

"No," Mary stated.

"What did you say?"

"We will not do as you say. You broke your promise to us; you said you would not hurt any of our kind."

"I kept my word!" Mohs argued, outraged as he let himself be swept up in the storm of his own emotions. "I haven't touched a single one of you filth!"

"You lie. You said you would not hurt any of our kind and again you order us to kill him." Mary said a single finger pointing straight at Luke.

"Damn you fool!" Mohs barked at Luke. "You're a replica as well?"

"That's right; you got a problem with that?" Luke challenged, a grin set wide on his face. Apparently that fact had slipped the former Grand Maestro's mind.

"It's irrelevant, you'll obey what I say or you'll be replaced!" Mohs commanded the replicas.
"And if we refuse, you intend to replace us?"

"Of course, I've no use for disobedient tools! There is no place for you on Eldrant!"

Mary turned to face Luke, her gaze deep and piercing, weighing the sides. Below her eternally calm disposition, it was plain to see as she faced her convictions. Never had her ways been tested, her beliefs put into question, and she desperately sought an answer in Luke's eyes. Her answer came with the drawing of her sword; pointed straight at Mohs. "For now," Mary stated resolutely, though her unwavering gaze was back on Mohs, it was clear her words were for them. "We will lend you our strength."

Jade launched the first arte half a second after Mary's last word and the blade of thunder pierced an Oracle Knight and plunged the courtyard into chaos. It was time to act, now before anyone had time to re-factor in the replica's forces. The seven of them were easily matching the Oracle Knights that remained, something for which Jade was grateful for neither Largo nor Sync lacked any fighting ability.

Natalia was surprised to see Jade launch the first attack, forget how suddenly it was, but if she'd learnt anything from travelling with him, it was that it was always best to follow such leads. He always had some sort of unbelievably well thought out reason behind everything he did. Natalia leaped back, dodging a flurry of Sync's hits. One punch caught her shoulder and she felt the fire fly through her arm. Guy and Luke both jumped in and distracted him. Natalia's arms shook, unable to hold her bow steady. She backed up a few paces and let a bunch of Seventh Fonons suffuse in the injury dulling the pain then eliminating it completely.

Largo's large scythe caught one of the replica's mid-section, the ensuing scream echoing in Natalia's ears as blood splattered across the Seventh Fonstone. She stopped the flow of Seventh Fonons and launched two arrows at the Black Lion who easily struck them out of the air. It amazed her how swiftly and easily he moved in such restricted space. The area his weapon could cover in a single swing made him a dangerous foe and he was rapidly decimating their forces. The replica's numbers were already almost half of what they'd been when just a few minutes ago.

Natalia ducked below his retaliating swing, this time aiming at his face. His posture would make the block difficult. Her aim was not to kill him, alone she knew the task would be impossible, but she could still occupy his time. If she could keep his attention, the others could focus on the other opponents that were interspersed among what had become sheer anarchy. Sync would be challenge enough to occupy them, protecting Mohs as he was. Out of the corner of eye, she saw the former Grand Maestro safely tucked away near the Seventh Fonstone, but Sync was mysteriously absent. Where-?

It happened so quickly Natalia didn't even know what had hit her.

"Stop!" Sync's voice echoed as silence swept over the courtyard.

Foolish. She'd been foolish. Natalia silently cursed at the blade she felt pressed against her throat. The looks of horror that were swept across her friends' faces beset a feeling of disappointment next to the fear that the pressure of the blade instilled. It was silly, her bow was snapped, discarded on the ground and with his free hand Sync twisted hers uncomfortably behind her and the only thought that came to mind, was that she didn't think that Sync carried a knife.

"No one moves or I'll slit her throat," Sync challenged, emphasizing his point by digging the knife in and letting a small trickle of red run down Natalia's neck.

Luke held his breath and no one had to see Asch's face to know how livid he was. It took every
drop of willpower he'd ever mustered to stay glued to the spot but the anger rolled off him in waves. Only his fear for what would happen to Natalia held him frozen in place. He knew damn well Sync was faster. Poor Ginji was never going to get his chance at the God-General, Asch would get him first... and it wouldn't be pretty when he did.

The replicas stared blankly at the situation, but seeming to understand, or maybe simply following Luke's lead, they too froze. Jade surveyed the damage that had been done so far. The Oracle Knights had all but fallen; the few survivors were either unconscious or pretending to be, not in any condition for further battle. The replicas had suffered at Largos hand, only Mary, another blonde and a brunette were still standing. Regardless of the casualties among the replicas, Mohs' side had been losing the upper hand and it was no surprise Sync had seen the opportunity. Still, he'd brought them to a stale mate. Sync would have a hard time holding onto Natalia and reading the Score at the same time. Not impossible by any means, but as soon as he was distracted, he'd be vulnerable and they could move. Sync knew it. Thus they were stuck.

"Excellent job," Mohs applauded, coming out of hiding. Sync slowly backed up a step at a time, never opening or leaving himself vulnerable, even under Jade's astute gaze. Mohs removed a dagger hidden within his robes and placed it next to Sync's. "Give her to me," Mohs ordered and Sync complied, covering Mohs' sloppiness with his own defensive position; he was freeing the God-General so he could read the Score.

The Grand Maestro held Natalia surprisingly tightly and Jade could tell that even if fear hadn't paralyzed her, she'd little, if any, opportunity to free herself from her bind. With Mohs under the watch of the God-Generals they would have to bide their time. Mohs would be easy enough to take down, but only once his guard could be dealt with, something that would, unfortunately, take longer than it would take for Mohs to kill their damsel in distress.

Mohs erupted into laughter, the only sound to break the tense silence, and it sent a chill through them all. It was crazed, full of all the madness of which they knew him capable. "Now nothing can stop me! No one will stop me from reading and uncovering Yulia's promised prosperity!"

The former Grand Maestro hauled Natalia towards the Seventh Fonstone and Natalia let out a small shout. Sync advanced to block the path between them and the hostage while Largo motioned to the side. Strange positions to be taking; all the possible formations, outcomes, all of it raced through Jade's mind like water rushing through a narrow creek until it came to a single hauntingly still conclusion.

Mohs intended to read the Score himself.

\[\text{The pain seared through his hand, still strumming, pulsing in time with his heartbeat as Jade Balfour pulled the dagger across his palm. He watched in mild satisfaction at the red line left behind, then at the small pooling of blood. He tipped his hand and let the red drops fall to the floor.} \]

\[\text{Drop.} \]

\[\text{Drop.} \]

\[\text{Drop.} \]

\[\text{The old knife was discarded, thrown across the room. The twelve year old looked back down at his hand and a grin spread across his face. This would work just fine. It was a simple cut, shallow and well above any tendons or other complex structures that would require more advanced skills. He} \]
simply needed some way to measure the effects of the Seventh Fonon, the strength of the arte he would invoke. There would be no way of knowing he was successful if the fonons had nothing on which to exert their effect. He'd carefully observed the Professor's artes several times, the flow of the fonons, the way they were strung together in an arte, he'd memorized it all down to the last detail. Now he would begin.

There was no potential source of error in his calculations, no fathomable reason that this would not work. If the first six fonons could be forced to subjugate to his will, then so could the Seventh. Of course he could command the Seventh Fonon. No one, not Saphir, not Nephry, not even Professor Nebilim would tell him otherwise.

Drop.

Drop.

Drop.

"Stop!" Jade shouted, his sudden panic turning even Asch's head. "Stop him," Jade ordered, slightly more composed but his tone no less urgent. No one dared to be the first to move. Jade betrayed a look of frustration with his group's hesitation, but even Asch wouldn't budge. Ion's death was still cast over them and the possibility of another froze them to the spot.

"You know you have no capacity to control the Seventh Fonon," the Colonel said directly to Mohs, when it was clear he would be getting no results from the others. "Don't be foolish, nothing will come of this!"

"Hah!" Mohs scoffed, pulling the dagger closer to Natalia's throat. "I am the true Fon Master! Of course I can read the Score! Every Fon Master since Yulia possesses the gift to see the future she witnessed."

"You are not a Fon Master!"

"I am!" Mohs bellowed, his voice reverberating off the stone walls. "I am the Fon Master! No one, not you or that fool Van will tell me any different! I will prove to the world that I am the one meant to lead them to the promised prosperity! Then no one will be able to doubt my authority!"

"No. Anyone who cannot control the Seventh Fonon should never attempt to use it!" Jade threw back with an edge to his voice, almost frantic in a way, if one could ever call Jade frantic. His heart began to race, breaking through the control he'd always kept it under and old nightmares were spinning out before him. This was the worst possible scenario he could have envisioned.

"Jade! Jade!" The familiar whining voice broke his concentration and he suddenly wished he still had that knife in his hand. Once he'd healed himself he could practice more by putting the runny-nosed whiner back together.

"What are you doing here Saphir?" Jade demanded. "I told you I wasn't going to help you tinker with any more of those fon machines of yours; I'm busy."

"You're trying to learn artes like the Professor's, aren't you? Even though she told you it's dangerous..."

"I've been watching her; it's no different than any other arte with any other fonon. There's no reason I shouldn't be just as capable as she is."
"But Jade, she said really bad things could happen!"

"Then go home!" Jade snapped. Saphir was silent and in those long minutes, Jade just waited for the sound of his sniffles. He'd cry, he always did, but it was the most effective way to be rid of him.

"No, if you're staying, then I'm going to stay here too," he answered with determination.

"Fine," Jade scowled. "Then go sit in a corner or something."

Saphir did as Jade asked, he always did. No sooner had the boy vanished from his line of sight did his so-called companion also vanish from his mind. He needed to be calm and had to focus. Mastering artes had come easier to him than to most, but he still knew to be cautious while experimenting. More reason he preferred to be alone. The less factors to interfere with the outcome the better. He felt the blood beginning to crust in his hand and Jade scowled again. Any more meaningless distractions and the cut will have healed itself already.

Jade reached out to the fonons, as distinct in the air around him as the snowflakes that fell beyond the window. The Seventh were simple to identify, the least familiar to him of all those that surrounded him and he beckoned them. They weren't responsive as the others that so readily flock to him, but Jade wouldn't be detoured by so simple a fact as that. He forced them forward, manipulating the other fonons to force them into submission and they began to answer his call.

Simple. Utterly simple; he had been foolish to listen to the Professor's words of caution. Like all the others, the Seventh Fonon could be easily commanded. The thought warmed Jade and a sadistic grin widened across his face. Nothing could stop him, he'd show the Professor the results of his work, and he could already see the look of surprise on her face, but beneath it there was that pride that he was her student. It was all the gratification he required, her approval, and the satisfaction of knowing he was perfectly capable of doing it. That no power was beyond his reach.

But the satisfied warmth continued to grow. Hot. Uncomfortably hot. The warmth grew into a small fire within his chest and quickly that fire exploded into a blaze. It was hot, far too hot and the heat was no longer within him but around him, burning through the building, searing the air and suddenly Jade couldn't breathe.

That's when his entire world went out of control.

Small drops of water began to fall, darkening the already sombre stones and washing the fresher of the bloodstains away. The sound of the rain echoed through the silence. The water streamed down Jade's face, drops on his glasses beginning to obscure his vision. The Necromancer could feel his amber hair cling to the back of his neck, sending more water through his already soaking uniform. The matter didn't register, he'd no room in his mind to even consider such a triviality.

"No matter what else happens, we mustn't let Mohs read the Score," Jade hissed in a tone low enough that only the few standing near him could hear.

"I don't get it Colonel," Anise whispered cautiously. "What's gonna happen if someone like Mohs tries to read the Score? A hyperresonance? If we can get Natalia out of the way, a hyperresonance would just take out Mohs and the Fonstone. I mean, isn't that a good thing?"

"You've never seen a true hyperresonance," Jade's reply was strained. "Luke and Asch's hyperresonance are very finely controlled and their talent in that regard is grossly under recognized. A full scale hyperresonance would take out the castle, if not the entire peninsula."

"But what can we do? They'll kill her faster than we can act," Guy pointed out.
"It won't be a hyperresonance that occurs," Jade replied.

"Then what's the big deal? He'll just fail, right?" Anise was getting exasperated. What the hell was the Colonel so worked up about? It's not like it was Natalia being a hostage that had him shaken, he was always cool when someone's life was on the line. So why was the idea of Mohs reading the Score making his face even whiter than Tokunaga's stuffing?

"If someone without the capacity to control the Seventh Fonon attempts to use it," Jade said hurriedly. "Even if it's so simple an arte as to read the Score or heal a small wound, the fonons will run rampant, first attacking the fonist and then destroying its surroundings. We mustn't-

Jade was halted by a soft pressure on his arm and he turned to see Asch looking up at him.

"It's okay, Jade," Asch said calmly as he was able. "We won't let it happen again."

Jade took a moment, forcing his racing emotions under control under the gaze of the worried teen. Asch was right; he was letting his past experiences cloud his better judgment. If Asch could keep his calm with Natalia as she was... Jade sighed. Keeping up with these young ones was beginning to grow difficult.

Composing himself he returned to analyzing the situation. Things were not the same as they had been that night. They had Luke and Asch and as much as he hated to, Jade was hoping that their connection to Lorelei might give them some ability to keep the Seventh Fonons under control. They would find a way to free Natalia and they would stop Mohs' foolishness. There had to be a hole; he would find it and the shadows of the past need not repeat themselves.

Mohs placed his hand on the fonstone and for the first few seconds, Jade dared to hope Mohs would be completely unable to educe a reaction from the Fonons in question and at the start it seemed to be the case. His forehead creased as he struggled to concentrate, but as hope usually did when the Colonel was foolish enough to believe in it, it collapsed before him with the smug grin of satisfaction that began to spread across the former Grand Maestro's face. Once the first few fonons began to move towards him, the others all did as well.

Now it began.

"ND2019, The forces of Kimlasca-Lanvaldear shall march northward, through the Rugnica Plains. After inflicting atrocities upon the villages in their wake, the army shall surround the fortress capital."

Jade didn't even have time to turn to the boys before both of them cried out. Luke fell to his knees first but Asch wasn't very far behind him. They were obviously in pain, it was written across their faces and it didn't take their hands cradling their heads for him to know what the source of their anguish was. Jade silently cursed, though his mind told him that he knew this would happen. He still remembered their reaction the last time they'd read the Score all those months ago in Daath for all they'd tried to hide it.

"Luke, are you okay?" Guy hurried towards his best friend, but was blocked by Jade. His concern, while appreciated by Luke, he was sure, would not do anything to change the situation and the Colonel needed every possible hand.

"What's going on?" Guy demanded.

"I'm not completely certain," Jade confessed. "But you'll recall that this has occurred before and they were fine once all was said and done."
"What? When?"

"Does this happen every time the Score is read in their vicinity?" Jade questioned.

"What are you talking about? They weren't like this last time!"

Jade raised an eyebrow. He knew that despite appearances, Guy was perceptive, especially when it came to Luke. He hadn't missed it.

"Now that you say that, they did look kinda funny when Ion read the Score about Akzeriuth," Anise commented.

"Does it happen every time?" Jade repeated the question.

Guy froze for a moment and then the wheels in his mind began to turn. "No," the blond finally replied. "But they aren't around the Score much. Asch hasn't had his birthday Score read since Luke was born, Duke Fabre wouldn't allow it. I guess he was worried about Akzeriuth and that the truth about Luke would come out. But I don't remember anything strange when anyone else's Score was read in the house. Why? What does the Score have to do with them?"

"But it isn't just any Score," Tear explained. "It's Yulia's. It's the Planet Score."

"That makes no sense!" Guy protested in frustration.

"Are you forgetting who gave Yulia the Score in the first place," Jade answered.

Guy let out a breath.

"Lorelei."

"Within a fortnight, the city shall fall. The Kimlascan army will stain the Malkuth throne with the blood of its last emperor. Their howls of victory shall resound throughout the land."

"Luke! You okay?" Anise asked as the pained look faded from the redhead's face. Jade registered the change but quickly dismissed it. The young noble was looking straight ahead but his eyes weren't focused on anything. He simply stared blankly forward almost as if possessed by some unseen force. His lips moved, softly at first but making out what he was saying was simple enough. He and Asch spoke in perfect unison.

"ND2020, A mountain of corpses shall bury the fortress capital. Death and disease shall envelope the city. The plague born thence shall become a new poison unto humanity, killing all within its reach. Its spread shall mark the true end of Malkuth."

"Colonel?" Tear asked, her eyes asking what was going on, shining behind her worry for her crippled companion and for her best friend still under the threat of a knife.

"Leave them be," Jade ordered. "As long as the God-Generals don't attack them, they'll be fine. We've more pressing concerns. I once witnessed the outcome of a Fonist who couldn't control the Seventh Fonon but attempted to use it anyway. It begins slowly at first but it will cumulate until everything in the vicinity, including all of us, are incinerated. We've only a few moments before things go out of control, that window is key."

"Kimlasca shall enjoy decades of prosperity as the plague of M-Malkuth grows. Ultimately, the plague sh-shall be b-b-brought into the Kimlascan k-kingdom by a s-s-s-single m-man."
"What the heck?" Anise exclaimed. Mohs appeared to have a small convulsion, one that drove his blade dangerously close to Natalia. He'd lost his grip on one of her arms and she struggled to free herself but was locked in his grasp. Her helpless flailing only spurred the desperation that coursed through everyone, clawing at them, tearing their hearts from their chests. They had to do something!

"Neural contamination," Jade said, his voice unusually flat. "The Seventh Fonons have begun to attack his mind, it won't be long now."

"But what about-" Guy trailed off, still only a foot from Luke's side.

"They're Seventh Fonists, they'll be fine."

"Grand Maestro!" Tear called out. "You must stop this! You're destroying yourself!"

"S-S-Score...I will... p-prot-tect the Scorre.. I will l-l-lead the w-w-world to prossperity!"

"Please!" Tear pleaded. "Return to your senses!"

"...Tttraitorrr! Uohh... I wwon't llet the world bbe dddestroyyed..."

"He's beyond the point of return," Jade placed a hand on her shoulder. "I doubt reason is capable of reaching him anymore."

The last words came from Luke and Asch alone.

"Thus shall Auldrant be destroyed by the miasma and turned to dust. This is the end of Auldrant."

"The Score..." Anise mumbled. "It's..."

"I- Imp- Impossssible!" Mohs cried. "You t- t- tricked m-me! This f-f-fonstone is fake isn't i-it? I-I'll k-k-kill herrr!"

"Now!" Jade yelled and the courtyard burst into chaos.

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"Jade!" The door burst open and Professor Nebilim's white hair and coat was all he could make out through his blurred vision. Her voice was unmistakable, a splash of cold water through the heat that consumed his senses. But how had she-

"I'm sorry Jade," Saphir sobbed in the corner. "I- I told Nephry to get her. I knew you were-"
Saphir hiccupped and the rest of his words were lost in the roar of a fire. Jade tried to open his mouth but couldn't, his actions were no longer his own. They belonged to the flames, his entire consciousness was theirs, unsure if it really wasn't all one and the same.

"Jade!" Nebilim rushed forward throwing the fonons away as she ran, a futile gesture as the rampant fonons returned with renewed eagerness. Only now did Jade recognize the fire beyond his caged existence. It had consumed the wooden building, flames licking at the walls, the furniture all of it was buried in the endless blaze. Nebilim reached out for him, floating mindlessly as he was in the midst of chaos, sleep beckoning just on the outskirts of his fading consciousness. The fire within him still burned, it had moved though, from within his chest to his mind. His head seared spreading the pain down through every nerve in his body and he writhed, grasping for the sleep that was just beyond his reach. Her cool touch jolted him and a violent shock washed through his world, waking him from the haze into which he'd faded...
A split second later, the air was shattered by a piercing scream.

The drizzle turned into a downpour, making it almost impossible to see what was going on. Blades clashed, the metal sending light dancing all over the courtyard, shimmers of rainbow colour danced on the walls where bloody pools still sat below the weathered stone. What seemed to be Oracle Knights came from the shadows where they'd silently concealed themselves, their healers tending the wounded. Jade cast his spear and pierced one of the Seventh Fonists' armour, not giving him time to think before he took his last breath.

A familiar pattern of fonons swirled in the air about him, an arte with which he was familiar. Where was the fonist? Who was casting? Half a second passed like a minute, the Colonel's eyes bolting through the mass before him. Sync protecting Mohs, Largo killing another of the replicas, only two remained now. Tear and Anise carefully protecting the twins, Guy covering for Mary, half a dozen Oracle Knights remained scattered, their chaotic attacks skewering his judgement.

His time was up, the fifth fonons ignited, and fire spun through the rain around him.

"Professor Nebilim!" Jade shouted. His eyes darted everywhere, his calculating mind unable to consider all the factors at once. The building was ablaze and they had to escape. He couldn't summon enough fourth fonons to eliminate the flames. They'd all fled from the surge of Fifth Fonons. Here in this chaos his talents, his mastery of artes, it all amounted to nothing.

For the first time in his twelve years of life, Jade Balfour felt helpless.

Jade hastily doused the unnatural flames with an arte of his own. An Oracle Knight reeled in surprise; the Necromancer's spear flew through his heart before he'd time to experience another emotion. Jade charged towards the former Grand Maestro, with barely a mind to notice just how erratic the Seventh Fonons had become. Mohs fought through a second convulsion, his arm locking itself around the Princess. She couldn't escape of her own volition. There was no time left. They had seconds. Seconds before this entire castle vanished into oblivion.

He raised his weapon just in time to block Sync's strike.

The Professor collapsed, her body spilling across the floor like the dolls Nephry played with. The heat beat against him and small beads of sweat poured down his face. Ever since he'd been born, the youngest Balfour had been small, not as sturdily built as other boys his age, one amongst many reasons he never picked with the more popular crowds. He could never care less but it was a factor that now put him at a disadvantage. His skinny arms were completely incapable of lifting the limp body before him, much less dragging her. Only a few feet and he was completely drained.

One of the beams in the ceiling collapsed exploding into flames and pieces of the roof became a brimstone rain around the young prodigy and his teacher. There was so little time left. Soon the entire building would collapse around them, the structure had been unstable before, now there was little to stand between the structure and the force of gravity. A second beam collapsed.

There was no time.
"Do you want to die here?" Jade demanded, his panic only pleasing the opponent facing him. No response came, no taunt, just an onslaught that even he fought to keep up with. A deadly dance across the slick rocks, through torrents of water that did not so much as slow the warriors.

Was this to be it? Was this to be the end of their ventures, their struggles? He knew the pattern; he knew the flow of the fonons. His mind still grasped at every single detail of that day. Nights he spent trying to forget, then hours in the day he fought to remember. Torn between his desire for knowledge and his guilt, his conscience, he had sacrificed the latter. This was the final result. He could count the seconds to the end.

Five.

Four.

Three..

Two...

One...

The air fled from his lungs, smoke consuming the little oxygen that remained in the collapsing building. Jade panted and again dropped Nebilim's arm. He didn't even have the strength to drag her out, and he was losing a battle against time. He couldn't do this alone.

"Saphir! I need your help, get over here," Jade called.

He hadn't noticed the sobbing until it had stopped. With trails of tears still leaking down his face, Saphir was instantly at his side. Not needing to be told, he grasped the Professor's other arm and together they pulled.

Her boots scratched against the wooden floors, her jacket snaring and ripping but not once did they stop. The world became inconsequential, an entity beyond the need for consideration. All that existed was this weight his shoulders trembled under and the navy sky beyond an opened door. A stray board fell and Jade felt his other shoulder dislocate. Inconsequential. Only a few more steps, another few seconds, it was all he needed, and then they'd be safe. Then all would be okay. He had never trusted in hope, not once, but now it was all he had. Two more steps, then all would be fine. He'd fix it all.

Nebilim's body spilled onto the fresh snow, dying it crimson beneath her. Jade knew enough about the body to know that having lost that much blood was not compatible with survival.

"Jade..." Saphir trembled, his tears spilling anew. "Jade what have we done?"

The question, his voice, Saphir had joined the inconsequentiality the rest of the world had fallen into. The crimson taint spread, growing wider with every second. There was no world without the professor. He couldn't let her die... if he did, Nephry would cry and... His last piece of reality shattered.

Betrayed by hope, Jade knew there was only one thing he had left he could rely on.

He would fix this error himself. Then everything would be alright. He would erase this reality and all that would remain of its passing was a patch of crimson snow.
The piercing scream brought the entire courtyard to a standstill. Blood spattered across the Seventh Fonstone, giving the world's tombstone an appropriately eerie look.

"Natalia!" Guy's scream still seemed to echo off the walls across the unearthly silence. Only the rain continued to beat down on them all. It couldn't be... it just couldn't be. Jade would have shaken his head as he read the blond's lips were it not for the dread that still clung to him, not yet washed away by the relief that was starting to surface. How imperceptive of him. But such a thing could be forgiven; chaos shook the most able of senses.

"I- I-" a meek voice came from next to the blond. Natalia sat shell-shocked in the mud, unable to get words at her lips, her eyes fixed to the gruesome scene that would haunt her dreams for many nights to come. Natalia felt her chest heave and her hands instinctively flew to her mouth in shock. True there hadn't once been any love lost for the overly devoted clergymen, and while she could honestly say she despised the man... that didn't... it didn't...

Largo pulled his scythe from the Grand Maestro's chest, his body collapsing like a rag doll into a pool of blood and other bodily fluids. The limp mass sat in a red puddle that slowly drained into the ground, lured away by the rain while those still standing in the downpour stood in shock, unable to process everything that had just happened at once.

What was left of the Oracle Knights had fallen, their bodies were still scattered around the yard. Several of the replicas lay amongst them but neither the God-Generals or any of Guy's friends had suffered any casualties. Luke and Asch seemed to have snapped out of whatever the hell had taken over them, but they were now both lying on the ground, unconscious from the looks of it. Damn it, there was too much going on he couldn't follow! Mohs was dead, thanks to what he'd thought was the man's bodyguard and somehow Natalia, who he'd seen locked in Mohs' grasp a split second before, was perfectly fine minus looking like she'd been tossed a couple feet. What the hell was going on?

"Enough is enough," Largo said simply.

"You'd betray your own comrade?" Guy demanded.

"I have pledged my sword to one master alone," Largo replied. "Never forget that."

"Mohs was a fool," Sync declared. "He clung to the Score and look what that did to him. He led himself to his own end."

"Death is the only end that exists for a world devoted to the Score," the Black Lion added.

"That's not true!" Natalia protested.

"You still intend to deny it? You've heard the Seventh fonstone Score for yourselves," Largo continued. "It is a Score of extinction!"

"Then we will build a world where the people survive, a path other than that the Score dictates," Natalia said.

"She's right," Luke agreed weakly, pulling himself up from the ground into a sitting position, one of his hands still cradling his head. "The Score isn't absolute. It's one possible choice among many futures."

"But if the end is the same regardless of the path to get there, what point is there to free will?" Largo inquired.
"The end... is the same?" Luke managed.

"The Score is the planet's memory," Largo continued. "It is every memory until the end of the world and everything will move according to that memory. The Score is nothing but a small portion of that memory, translated into human words. Even if you abandon the Score, halt all readings, the planet will keep its own memory and follow it to the inevitable end."

"Then you too will meet that end, if everything is as unchangeable as you say," Natalia argued. "You claim free will means nothing, then what is different about the choices you and Van are making?"

"Van's vision of destroying the Score is to destroy Lorelei, the planet's memory itself. He will earn the right for all living things to build their own future. I believe in that ideal, and have chosen to join him. Remember this: your methods are too weak."

"And the weak don't have any need of the fun toys," Sync said tauntingly, readying himself. His eyes focused in on Asch, who had also woken, though more silently than his sibling. The older redhead instinctively took a defensive stance, clutching the Sword of Lorelei. No one was going to get it from him that easily.

"Enough Sync," Largo placed a large hand on his comrade's shoulder. "Our mission here is complete." The God-General warily eyed them as well as the replicas that had placed themselves between the redheads and their opponents. "There will be ample opportunity for that later."

"Fine," Sync spat. "We've got better things to do anyway. But we will be back for it, so don't get too attached."

"Over my dead body," Asch hissed.

"Hmph, that can be arranged," Sync replied, but before Asch could formulate any kind of witty reply, both God-Generals vanished into Choral Castle's shadows.

A sigh of relief swept through Natalia's friends, exhaustion coming down on them like the rain that continued to fall. For the young Princess though, the appeasement wouldn't come. Her emotions remained in turmoil, like the stormy miasma filled skies. The cold of her wet garments soaked through into her heart. Yes, everyone could be relieved, but they didn't know what had really happened and the questions that came with that knowledge would be long to abate.

What the others didn't realize, was that it wasn't chance that had saved her life, nor had it been her own strength. Largo had pulled her from the path of his attack, thrown her aside as the blood curdling scream filled the air, leaving her in the mud, heart still racing faster than the Princess thought possible.

Why? What purpose did she serve to him? There was no doubt in her mind he had the strength to have pierced them both with that weapon of his and been guaranteed of both casualties. Would it not have been more convenient to have her dead? One less person to stand in their way, one less to oppose Van's new world... even if she were considered no threat, that didn't explain why there was need to exert extra effort to spare her life. So then why... why had he spared her?

A small sparkle in the mud caught her eye, a glimmer reflecting from the few remaining fonstones alight in the darkening yard. Natalia grasped the locket in her hand and held it curiously, unable to make out the markings or the picture through the dirt that covered it. A good cleaning would fix that. It was curious, the shape was wrong for it to belong to Luke or Asch. Whose could it be?
"Natalia!" The Princess hastily shoved the treasure into a pocket and accepted Luke's hand. "Are you alright?"

"I'm- well I guess-"

"A bit shaken no doubt, but without any injuries to speak of," Jade provided and Natalia smiled weakly in gratitude; right on the mark as usual. Tear smiled hopelessly and raised her hand, healing the marks Mohs' dagger had left on her neck.

"Th-Thank you, Tear," Natalia managed. She bit back her lip but all her will couldn't stop the swell of emotions. It was ridiculous, everything was over! Everything was fine...

Asch's hand wrapped around hers, steadying the clenched fist that rattled at her side. Before Natalia knew what she was doing, she'd her arms wrapped around him, sobbing into his shoulder. Asch smiled softly and held her back, gently stroking her golden hair.

"Shhhhh," he whispered softly. "You're okay now, you're okay..."

Guy sighed, forgetting for a moment that he was supposed to be pissed at his older charge, noticing just how shaken Asch himself was. He was glad everything had turned out for them. Stupid Asch. Didn't he understand just what he was throwing away? Couldn't he see what he was putting them through? If he were to actually die, Natalia crying like this would be nothing... forget what it would do to Luke.

"What about you?" Guy asked, stealing himself from his musings. "How are you after all that?"

"I'm okay," Luke answered, rubbing his head annoyingly.

"We are glad to see you are well."

"Thank you," Luke turned to face Mary and her last standing companion, a brown haired replica looking to be of a man in his thirties. "And thank you for your help. I'm... I'm sorry that so many of your companions died..."

"We came here in search of answers," Mary replied. "We came of our own accord and for our own reasons. Those that came knew of dangers and were prepared for that possible outcome. We are grateful for your concern though."

"Did you find the answers you were looking for?" Luke asked.

"We confirmed the truth of what was said to us the last time we met," she answered. "We truly have no place in this world."

"That's not-!" Luke's protest was cut off when Mary raised a hand.

"No, it is correct. We will return to the Tower of Rem and discuss your offer. Until you return, may your journeys be safe." And with that Mary and her remaining companion wandered off.

"Th-thanks," Luke managed, but for once he wasn't entirely sure if he meant it.
The floating land of Eldrant was boundless, its expanding borders now stretched further than the eye could see from a single vantage. The sky that had once closed it in stretched out of reach and with its expansion birthed their dream, a slowly growing reality that no one would deny them. So long had Legretta imagined this day, the results of fruitful words made tangible, the day she could watch the future unravel before them. The image had dangled in her mind, in every moment she'd ever struggled to find meaning in her actions, to find reason to persevere beyond the obstacles life would put to her... it was always this moment, this goal that pushed her forward. Reality however, was not so kind a master.

Legretta's steps echoed, each stride in perfect sync rapping like the seconds of a clock, precious seconds flying away on the soft spring breeze. It was so hard to think of time here in this frozen eternity. Time had no value, no meaning at times. An endless spring, an endless rebirth; but the seconds still counted down and she continued to walk. Tick. Tick. Tick.

No... things were not how she'd always envisioned they would be, but such details were irrelevant. It was the end result that mattered; the end and not the means that would count for centuries to come. In the rewriting of history, her petty worries would never merit any concern, nor did they deserve any. It was unbefitting a soldier. Though this truth was one she knew, that repeated endlessly in her mind, the God-General remained unsettled. Doubts she had long since forbidden herself festered like the pit in her stomach that surfaced when she thought on the issues that plagued her. But she denied them; she would deny them as long as was necessary. The new world was not ready to be completed yet; there were still obstacles to surmount and challenges to be met. Then and only then, would she be able to properly rest.

"Commandant." Legretta greeted her commander, announcing her presence to the man who sat alone, seemingly meditating; only the expression on his face belying the cause of his focus.

"Commandant!" she repeated, betraying an edge of concern. "Are you alright? Is it Lorelei?" It wouldn't be the first time the being strained him, the first time it threatened his still unstable existence. They couldn't afford to lose him again. She couldn't afford to lose him again.

"Legretta," Van replied, his voice flatter than usual, completely passing over her inessential worries. He'd thought better of her; she'd no ability to focus of late. "What's your report?"

"Commandant, you haven't been long out of the core, Lorelei is clearly still straining your body; you should leave the worrying about mundane matters to us."

"You're too incompetent for me to leave them to you!" Van snapped.

Legretta knew full well the Commandant hadn't been in the best of moods recently, Lorelei's constant resistance to its imprisonment strained him more than he'd admit; not to mention the fact he hadn't returned to full health yet. His use of Yulia's hymns had saved his life, for Lorelei had no choice but to respond to the covenant he'd made with Yulia, but it bound the ancient being no more than that. True her failures of late were unacceptable, and there was no reason for them not to have the Sword of Lorelei in their possession; but to hear such harsh words from him, Legretta still felt as if someone had stabbed her. She had always been his most trusted... the tone he'd taken with her was one reserved for the lowly... the disregarded; those whose loyalty meant nothing to him.

Whether her surprise had been apparent or not, Van quickly regained his composure and sighed deeply. There was no remorse in his tone, no sign he regretted what he'd said, but he continued as
"Your report Legretta," he said sternly. "Since you are here, what is Cantabile's status? Where are the Sword and Jewel of Lorelei?"

"Cantabile..." Legretta hesitated. "Cantabile hasn't officially reported in since Arietta's death," she said solemnly.

"Officially?" Van cocked an eyebrow.

"No one has seen her," Legretta clarified with a touch of uncertainty in her normally confident voice. "We can't confirm whether she's actually returned to Eldrant at any point or not but her whereabouts are currently unknown. Largo has reported that Mohs is dead. At that time Asch was still in possession of the Sword of Lorelei. However, due to the chaos that Mohs created with the Seventh fonstone, there was no opportunity for either Largo or Sync to retrieve it from him. For the time being Sync will continue to gather replica data, but his actions are slowly being restricted in many of the major cities. Without Mohs spearheading the image of the New Order, we can assume that this situation is unlikely to improve."

Van let out a frustrated sigh. "Why was I not informed that the Seventh Fonstone had been located? Who told Mohs where to look?"

"We believe he blackmailed Kimlasca into providing him with its location in exchange for not revealing their involvement with fomicry. Dist is the most likely to have provided him with the information necessary to do this and is also currently missing. I will organize a search for him and Cantabile immediately."

"You've more important things to search for."

"Cantabile is-"

"Her whereabouts are unknown and can't be counted upon."

"A search wouldn't take long to conduct, Dist-"

"Is no longer necessary! He has served his purpose, leave him to do as he pleases. I doubt we could guarantee his cooperation at this point, especially if Mohs surrendered what he sought from us."

"Regardless!" Legretta protested. "Such furtive actions cannot be trusted!"

"If he does anything to compromise us, he can be dealt with. The same goes for Cantabile; if they won't contribute to our cause then I've no use for either of them," Van stated harshly, shutting Legretta's argument down where it stood.

Legretta stood there for a moment, uncertain what to make of the situation. She'd always known there had never been any love lost between Van and the eccentric researcher, but even Cantabile? Hearing the Commandant say such things about his subordinates, about someone she'd believed he cared for, still caught her off guard. While at the back of her mind, Legretta knew that each of them had their own reasons for partaking in the new world the Commandant was building, and there were plenty of reasons he may know of that would make forcing Dist and Cantabile to return futile, Legretta remained unsettled as ever. The harshness of his voice, the coldness of his eyes... this... this was the man that had murdered her brother, not the noble commander whose ideals and compassion had overturned her heart and shattered her plans for revenge.

Surely it was nothing, stress was abound at this crucial time, and her failure was beyond excusable.
Between ensuring that all the cogs of his plan fell into place and keeping the centerpiece of it all, Lorelei, imprisoned, the Commandant had more than reason to be short with her. He’d suffered, still struggled for their goals and she had delivered him nothing. She couldn't even take a simple sword from one little boy.

Legretta shook her head. It was beyond the time of doubt; she had long since committed herself to him and his ideals regardless of the consequences that would come. Legretta knew she would remain at his side, no matter where that path would lead.

They would create a world for the future, and then their time would pass.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Even though the sun had set hours ago, the air in Choral Castle was still hot and humid. So humid that it was going to be forever until anyone started to dry off from the shower they'd just stepped out of. Great. While their ordeal with the Seventh Fonstone had finally come to an end and the last couple replicas were on their way back to their not so little tower, the weather didn't show any signs of letting up. A midnight walk, well past midnight by now, but a walk in a creepy old mansion and some acid rain courtesy of the miasma, just what Anise had always wanted... she rolled her eyes. At least it washed the mud out of their clothes... and the blood.

A shiver flew up Anise's spine and she bit her lip so hard she could taste the unmistakable taint of the overly familiar red stuff. She was so stupid! For how long now had she dreamed up Mohs' death, wished for it more than anything else? That good for nothing pig was finally gone, and got exactly what the dirty bastard deserved: to be stabbed in the back by someone he thought was his ally. Or... to be precise, stabbed in the front. That was... That was just... gruesome, even by her standards, and Anise had always figured she'd a creative imagination. Well she definitely had a healthy new respect for Largo's weapon. Another shudder. She'd spent weeks dreaming of Mohs' death, and somehow now she had a feeling that the sight of his innards half hanging out of his dead body would be the subject of many nightmares to come.

The steady patter of rain against the few remaining windows was the only thing that broke the silence not that anyone was too eager to strike up a conversation. In fact, the bit of silence was nice. After all, their lives had been nothing but chaos lately; everything was just... it was too fast. So many things to say... topics that had once seemed so important, that would be brought up at the first possible opportunity, had become impossible to pull out of the recesses of her mind. Maybe once they'd had some sleep. Even Mieu was too tired to bother jumping in the puddles their dripping hair left laying about.

Luke rung the water out of his jacket, one of his longer ones that must be awfully heavy soaked through to the bone like that. He tried to fix his hair but the unruly red strands were a complete mess and he gave up on them after a few attempts. Anise peered over her shoulder, debating trying to wring Tokunaga out but decided against it as quickly as the idea had come to mind. Too much effort to bother; she was used to the giant slop of muddy water on her back anyway and it's not like it did her weapon any harm. It had been made durable; she could definitely attest to that.

"How are you feeling Natalia?" Tear asked gently, being the first to break the spell that hung over them all. The Princess in question was standing meekly next to her fiancé with said fiancé's arm curled protectively around her. Any friction that Asch's actions at the Tower of Rem may have caused had been forgotten for the time being. Hell the whole issue seemed forgotten for the time being, but Anise wasn't going to be the first to say anything. No, if anyone deserved the first shot it was definitely Luke, and even he had enough sense to tell this wasn't the time or the place. Maybe on a few more hours sleep... when there was some chance that the argument wouldn't end in
bloodshed. Besides, Natalia kind of needed Asch in one piece right now.

"I-I'm fine," Natalia managed, but she betrayed her real answer by sinking further into Asch's gesture.

"Better, at least?" Anise piped up with a sceptical look reminding her no one believed a word she was saying. Natalia nodded a reply. "Good!" Anise continued with an unhealthy level of cheer. Silence was nice but got boring so fast. It was too damn dreary when everyone was all clammed up like that. It left too long to think about the less than pleasant things, something Anise had discovered she did better off avoiding. "How about the psychic duo over here? I for one would like to know what the heck that was all about in there. Like since when do you two read the Score? You guys sure picked a bad time to be M.I.A."

"What are you talking about?" Luke asked confusedly, only managing to extract the fact that Anise was referring to him and Asch from the mumbo jumbo that had come out of her mouth.

"What happened to you two in there? You went all... weird."

"We did? I... don't know," Luke confessed. "I kinda... blacked out, I don't remember anything beyond my head being on fire."

"Wait- but what about that stuff you were saying?"


"Don't worry about it Luke," Guy supplied, cutting off his best friend with a bit of a chuckle. "Everything is fine. You didn't say anything stupid."

"I don't know, I just... have a really bad feeling about it all," the younger redhead replied hesitantly. "Whatever it was, it wasn't good."

"What I want to know is what's going on," Asch cut in. "Why did we black out like that?"

"I don't think you need to be concerned about it right this second," Jade intervened. "It's unlikely to occur again anytime soon; I'd like to save such a discussion for a later time. For now we'd best be out of here. The remaining guard is undoubtedly waiting for an explanation of our actions."

"Jade's right," Guy agreed, beginning what he had a feeling was going to be a very long walk back to the entrance. "We should regroup and get things settled. Once we make sure this isn't going to spark an international incident, we can figure out what to do next."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

It didn't take long to establish, if only from the empty hallways, that the Kimlascan and Malkuth soldiers had retreated from more than just the immediate vicinity. The sole company being that of the corpses lining the hallways made the walk eerie and Tear silently wished there was more sounds than simply the echoing of everyone's footsteps. Not that she could think of a suitable conversation starter. Poor Natalia was tired of the attention focused on her after her little ordeal. The poor girl, she felt bad enough without being constantly reminded of how helpless she'd been. Not that anyone would dream of blaming her for such thing; it wasn't like she'd had any sort of military training, and even if she had, it took someone... well someone like Jade to keep their head in that sort of situation.

Yet, even the Colonel hadn't had his head completely about him in that last battle. It bothered her;
Tear always knew Jade as calm, level-headed amongst even the most chaotic mayhem. Nothing shook him; ever. Not Akzeriuth, not Sheridan, not Ion's death, or even Asch's declaration at the Tower of Rem; never once had he faltered.

That last battle was different though; through and through it had shaken him in some way. It couldn't have been Natalia's ordeal; nor was it Luke and Asch, he'd dealt with Lorelei in the core without batting an eye. Was it the revelation of Yulia's final Score? No, that didn't seem right either; Jade never exhibited any kind of attachment to the Score or the system it supported. Besides, the near panic had begun before Mohs started to read the Score. What had gone on that had the power to make even the Colonel so frantic?

There was only one time Tear could remember him being unlike himself and that was back before their encounter with Van in the Absorption Gate. Back when he'd taken Ion and gone to Keterburg of his own accord, the reason for which no one had ever really ascertained. Could that be what this was about? Ties to the history of the man they knew so little about? The professor he supposedly murdered? Did something about all of this have to do with Jade's past?

"I once witnessed the outcome of a Fonist who couldn't control the Seventh Fonon but attempted to use it anyway..."

It was an answer Tear suspected she would never get.

They heard the laughter before they saw the lights, though the two elements came in quick succession. Triumphant and prideful, muttered words interspersed between the cackles beaming out of a room of green lights. The once casual stride that had carried them this far suddenly became a cautious and slow pace, everyone on full alert for the sudden presence of an intruder. Once they'd come closer a second sound accompanied the first, it was a familiar whirring, that of a fon machine. Someone was in the fomicry lab, and with a laugh like the one that now clearly rung in her ears, Tear knew exactly who it was.

Jade was the first to round the corner and Asch was quick to follow in his steps. The narrow hallway opened into the vaulted cavern that the older redhead could have traced with his eyes closed for the number of times he'd visited the damn place in nightmares. Just like in those nightmares, a green light reflected eerily from the stones, glittering as it bounced from the puddles of frigid water that always lingered in the old manor. The air was stifling and the heat from the fon machines had taken the humidity and turned the room into a veritable sauna, tightening his chest in an all too familiar fashion. Though the cavern didn't shake him like it once had, Asch still hated it here. So why did it piss him off so much to see that Dist had set up camp here?

But the crazier of the two old men had definitely set himself up, and given the fact that they'd just passed through here no more than a couple hours ago, and the soldiers even less than that, Dist had been a busy little boy. He was planted in front of the controls, oblivious to the intrusion muttering something to himself. Asch hissed a curse, knowing full well what the God-General was doing; after all, those controls only served one function, but with the tier of the fon machine where the original sat empty, Asch couldn't help but wonder what the hell Dist was trying to replicate.

"What the hell!" Anise called in surprise at seeing the massive room aglow.

"Anise!" Guy hissed but it was too late. Dist noticed their presence.

"Jade!" Dist called excitedly. Doubtless any and all other presence in the room hadn't penetrated the man's remarkably one-track mind yet. His tone was a bit different than usual though; less hostile than it had been in previous encounters. It seemed surprised, yet satisfied at the same time all mixed into one creepy obsession that Asch feared might be ready to bear fruit. "You've come!"
"What are you doing here Dist?" Anise asked with a sneer that was, in spite of its snotty tone, far more contained than what the former Fon Master Guardian would like to have showed. This was the absolute last thing any of them wanted to deal with. It had to be at least 1 or 2 o clock in the morning and dealing with Dist took far more than the patience of a saint. "I thought it was past the reaper's curfew," she shot.

"What am I saying, of course you've come!" Dist continued to ramble on, ignoring the jab completely, if he'd heard it at all. There was a light in his eyes, a creepy twisted kind of exuberance in him that left everyone on edge. What the hell did he have cooking? "Fate brought you here. Nothing could keep you from this miraculous day!"

"What are you talking about?" Jade demanded, the harshness in his reply worrying Asch. It wasn't like him not to make a taunt or join in the mutual harassment of the God-General, especially when Dist spewed that kind of fluff crap. In fact, the look in Jade's ruby eyes was downright dangerous. This situation was going to get ugly, especially since Jade still wasn't quite over what Mohs' stunt had forced him to relive.

"Don't have such a sour face," Dist continued, oblivious as always to when his life was in mortal peril. Just shut up, why couldn't Dist just shut up? Asch did not look forward to picking up the remains of the God-General's innards from the cavern floor when Jade was done with him. How had Dist lived this long without any survival instincts to speak of?

"You should be happy, after so many years, what you wanted, what we've always wanted is about to become a reality!" The God-General announced. "I'll make your dream come true!"

"I don't see how that's possible as you still seem to be breathing," Jade shot, the coldness in his tone adding a sharp edge to the taunt. It was clear they'd finally found end to Jade's almost infinite patience. What lay beyond that, Asch was almost afraid to find out. Of course, Dist continued regardless.

"After all this time, we finally have everything we need. We can finally revive the Professor! Rejoice! She's here, being born as we speak!"

Jade was dead silent.

"What the hell are you talking about you stupid dingbat?" Anise demanded. "Hello! The Colonel doesn't want to replicate anything; if he did he wouldn't have banned it!"

"As if a simpleton like you could possibly understand!" Dist protested. "Only I know what it is Jade truly wants. Only I really comprehend..."

"If you wanted to die so bad you could have just asked," Asch shot, for once actually meaning the words behind what otherwise seemed like the usual exchange with Dist. He warily eyed Jade, clueless as anyone who tried to figure the Necromancer out was bound to be, only fearing the look he saw on his comrade's face. He knew better than anyone what it was like to face the shadows of one's past. What he didn't know is what Jade would do about it, and just how that would impact the man he had come to respect.

"What have you done..." Jade's voice was hard, and his closed fists came as close to trembling as they ever would. "Saphir!"

Jade launched himself at the researcher from the second level. He narrowly missed Dist landing hard on the stone floor, but wasting no time, he spun around and launched a second blow. Blood flew, the attack connecting with Dist's arm, but only grazing it. The God-General made no move to
retaliate, but his evasion skills were not to be underestimated, dodging each and every one of Jade's consequent flurry. Fonons flew every which way as artes were exchanged; Dist's pitiful in the face of Jade's exceptional talent. Jade hadn't been called a prodigy for nothing; the researcher just couldn't keep up. He wasn't dead yet though, and that could be considered impressive in and of itself when the Colonel was most definitely going for a kill.

Everyone stayed on the ledge, stunned at Jade's impulsiveness but mesmerized but the ferocity of his attacks, still graceful for all of their recklessness.

"And I thought that was my department," Asch muttered under his breath the hint of a smirk on his face. "Come on," he commanded. "We have to put a stop to this. We can't let Dist finish whatever he's making."

Anise momentarily snapped out of the trance she'd been in. She'd hand it to Dist, he was pretty damn good at dodging those attacks. Not once had she ever considered Dist to be capable physically. Like, come on! The man secluded himself in a lab for days at a time and could probably count on one hand the times he'd voluntarily exposed himself to the light of day... He'd built himself a floating chair for crying out loud! But he was holding his own... if you could call not dying while the Colonel attacked you holding your own. Still, something was freakishly backwards about this whole scenario. Why was Jade so worked up, and why did Asch seem to know exactly what was going on? For Yulia's sake, what's with all the damn secrets?

"But wha-"

"Now!" Asch cut Anise off without giving her a second look. Fine, let him be that way, Anise sneered as she followed him down the steps. Him and the Colonel... jerks, the both of them.

"D-Don't worry Jade," Dist said as he scurried to evade the Necromancer's assault. "Soon she'll be reborn! Everything will go back to normal, they'll be how they once were, you'll see! We can go back to how things were, to how you were... things will be right again!"

"You're a fool Saphir!"

"Jade!" Luke called out, distracting him long enough for Dist to slip out from under the assault and towards the cavern wall.

"Don't interfere," Jade replied, his voice calmer than anyone expected it to be given the rashness of his actions. "This is my mistake; I shouldn't have let things go on like this, leaving him and his foolishness to go unchecked all these years. I will see that amends are made."

"Not without us you're not," Asch butt in, taking a defensive stance between Jade and his opponent. Following his lead, everyone else also added to the barrier separating the two opponents. Asch could feel the discontent against his back and part of Asch was glad he couldn't see the look on Jade's face. "Guy!"

"We have to stop the machine," the blond declared, running towards the controls, sending a wave of panic through the scrambling researcher who would never cut through the group in time to stop them.

"Not so fast!" Dist pulled a small metal device from one of his pockets and held it out threateningly. Everyone froze in their tracks. "This is a detonation switch! I have explosives set up all around this cave! Come any closer and I'll set them off!"

"You wouldn't!" Guy shouted. "You'd be buried alive in here with us!"
"But he would," Luke realized with a dawning horror. What was going on here had finally clicked; after Asch'd probably had it all figured out since they got here of course. Luke silently cursed but pushed those feelings aside. He'd deal with that crap later, Dist had to be stopped. Before he finished his replica, and before he brought the entire mansion down on their heads.

"Jade," Dist pleaded. "You know this is what you want; I know that this is the course you truly desire!"

"It's time you stopped these foolish games!" Jade shot.

"Never! Once Professor Nebilim is revived, you'll go back to your old self! You'll see! Together we'll relive that golden era!"

Jade shook his head. "This is entirely my fault for letting you go this long, but rest assured it's not a mistake I intend to repeat. This all ends now!"

Jade moved unbelievably fast, so fast Asch didn't even have time to consider how he might stop him, much less consider whether or not he really should be getting in Jade's way. This was his fight, his past that the old man had yet to settle... and he was clearly intent on settling it now.

The spear flew at impossible speeds through the air, leaving the Necromancer's hand hardly a split second after he'd gotten through the barrier his companions had erected. With a howling scream, the weapon pierced Dist's left shoulder sending the God-General reeling back towards the stone wall, already decorated with his spattered blood. The detonation switch flew harmlessly from his hand, landing with a clink on the ground.

The metal shattered mercilessly beneath a navy boot; the equally pitiless Necromancer approached his crippled opponent. The green glow of the fon machine cast an eerie glare on the pair, hiding Jade's blood red eyes behind his glasses. His stride was steady and calm, exuding an overwhelming level of authority and condemnation. Dist simply babbled nonsense, his voice so pained no one could figure out what he was saying. He was pleading, begging for his life as his blood pooled around him. Taking one end of the spear, Jade clasped it tightly and with a second blood-curdling scream from Dist, jammed it through the rock effectively pinning the God-General to the wall.

Dist's breathing was laboured, the injury and blood sending his head spinning and lending an all too familiar ringing to his ears. No, he wouldn't be defeated here... he had to stay conscious. Soon everything would be right again. He'd dedicated his life, his entire existence to restoring things to how they should be. They'd been happy once... Jade had been happy once. He would not be denied the right to witness that moment in all its glory. Not when it was this close! Things would be right, Jade would be right again... no matter what, he would be here to see it. He just had to... he just had to...

"Guy," Jade spoke up, the tone in his voice foreign; instilling a rather significant degree of fear in all of them. "Stop that machine." No one would dream of doing anything but.

"I c-can't," Guy answered. "It won't let me."

"You're too late," Dist choked out. "It's inevitable; no one can stop her birth now. You'll see, you'll be back to... your old...self."

"Jade..." Anise called warningly.

"Don't bother," Dist spat, though his voice was barely above a whisper now. "He remembers where his heart lies."
"Can it you overinflated bag of hot air!" Anise shouted back. "Nothing you can pull out of a fomicry machine's gonna mess with the Colonel. Between the seven of us we'll--" Anise found her way blocked by Luke's arm. The redhead shook his head but never offered an explanation. No one else made any motion to move either. Maybe this really was the Colonel's fight... but still! What had they come all this way together for if they were just gonna abandon him now?

Luke watched on not sure what to do. Professor Nebilim had been someone really special to Jade, to have a replica of her around would be so cruel... but that alone didn't deny the replica its right to live. After all... Asch had been precious to people too, it didn't mean they should get rid of him. Maybe having her around would help Jade deal with what had happened to her original. Jade had said a replica couldn't give him the forgiveness he sought; that was true but... could she give him atonement? Luke almost laughed at himself. Asch was right, he was naive... but he'd rather be naive and hopeful than what Asch had become. So Luke would hope that something good could come of this, but there was a darker side deep within him that was winning, and the redhead had a feeling he already knew the answer to his question.

Asch couldn't even fathom a guess at what might be running through Jade's mind; even they, who likely knew him better than anyone other than Peony and his sister had no clue the emotions that ran like rapids far below his ever impenetrable surface. Yet there was no doubt they did as that eerie reflection of his past climbed down from the fomicry machine.

Asch had never gotten a proper description from Jade, but somehow Nebilim fit the redhead's image of her. Short spiked white hair framed a smaller round face and her bangs hid her left amber eye from view. Her frame seemed small but not so much that Asch would mistake her for being weak. Though the arms and legs that were visible from beneath the tattered cloth that covered her were skinny, she had an air about her in the same way Jade did. You thought twice before crossing her path.

Everyone was dead silent as this strange woman examined her surroundings. She seemed harmless enough, curiosity looking to be her only character trait; but Asch hadn't forgotten Jade's story. The last replica he'd made of her had been a painful failure, one that had almost killed him before he'd been forced to kill her. The future monarch didn't doubt that if replicating her was as simple as this, Jade himself would have succeeded over the course of the twenty odd years he'd spent refining the process.

Dist didn't seem to have programmed her to any great extent, he probably hadn't the time; or maybe even in his delusions he expected her to emerge into this world as her original had left it. He definitely sounded like that's what he figured was going to happen. Like time was just going to ignore the past twenty-odd years just because he made a replica, as if anything were that convenient. No matter how much anyone wanted it, time didn't go backwards.

Time did, however, seem to like to stop these days, and it definitely felt like it had, watching the white haired replica place one foot unsteadily in front of the other bringing her closer to them, closer to Jade who would be the first person she'd encounter. Asch almost held his breath; the tension was palpable. The replica of Nebilim stumbled; Jade instinctively reached out to catch her.

"Jade!" Luke called out, the tension snapping and he quickly bit back his outburst.

"J...Jade," the replica repeated, her amber eyes meeting his. The Colonel froze.

"Jade," she said again, this time louder and running a hand along Jade's shoulder, fingering the material that made up his navy military uniform.

A twisted smile spread across her face.
Asch had never heard Jade scream or even cry out, not even once. He was the only one who never seemed to get hurt, or at least not badly. Even if he was in pain, he never voiced it, not so much as an 'oww' unless it was in jest. But Jade screaming was a sound Asch was never going to forget.

Razor sharp nails dug into the Colonel's chest, rattling sickeningly as they ran down his ribcage, spraying blood all over his attacker. Jade stumbled backwards clutching his chest where his uniform was steadily darkening in a steadily growing pool of blood. The replica stood there staring at the hand that had caused the injury, taking a revolting degree of pleasure in it.

Jade fought off a wave of nausea and weakness. Foolish! He had been completely deceived, by no one other than himself and the whimsical lie called hope. A second wave of dizziness came and he could feel his posture weaken. He'd known this was impossible, known that the replica could be nothing more than a bloodthirsty creature but he'd dared to believe otherwise. It hadn't been so many years since he'd faced her ferocity, felt her wrath, her claws tear at his flesh were it nothing. His memory was not so poor as that. He'd let ill-considered emotions cloud his judgment and he'd paid the price dearly.

She was a monster; she would always be a monster.

"Jade!" Tear and Natalia were at the Colonel's side faster than anyone could blink. Panic swept through everyone. Jade was bleeding; he was bleeding a lot... from his chest. His normally perfect hair was in disarray and the blood spattered on his face and glasses only made him look worse. Damn it! Asch put himself between Nebilim and Jade in case the bitch decided she wanted another shot.

"Jade," Natalia spoke as gently as she could, trying to keep her voice steady while Tear worked. Bless her for being able to so unwavering in these sorts of situations. The princess couldn't keep track of how often she found herself grateful to the melodist. This was certainly one of them. A huge sigh of relief escaped her when she saw the injury. The replica hadn't pierced his heart, but it did look like one of his larger arteries had taken a hit. "Jade, I need you to try and breathe as shallow as you can while maintaining consciousness. The muscles in your chest will tear open again if you take deep breaths." Jade made no sign of acknowledgement but his compliance to her request reassured the princess that he'd heard her.

"What the hell is the deal here?" Guy asked, standing defensively beside Luke and Asch.

"It's berserk," Asch provided. "She'll attack anything and everything until someone stops her."

"But... she was just born," Guy argued.

"Yeah well that doesn't seem to matter much," Asch replied with a flicker back towards Jade. "Don't underestimate her. She looks awkward, but there's no saying what Dist gave her for programming. She looks like she knows her vital spots."

"She was going for his heart..." the blond muttered, keeping his voice as low as he could. It did little to assuage the horror of the realization, and even less to keep the statement from reaching Jade's ears. Not that the overly astute Colonel hadn't realized that already.

"I don't get it!" Luke protested, raising his voice. "Why... why is she like this?" The younger redhead shook his head in denial but didn't move from his spot between the replica and his companion. It didn't make sense, replicas had no memory of the past, or of other replicas that came before them, why would she attack Jade like that. Why was she so strong, so apt to do harm and to
enjoy it so much? Why did everything have to be like this? Jade didn't deserve this! He may be a jerk sometimes and liked to pick on them in his oh so one-sided way, but he was still a good person. Luke respected him. He deserved to be happy too!

"It's inevitable," Jade's voice came from behind him.

"Colonel, please don't try to speak," Tear protested immediately. "You'll just keep tearing open your wounds."

"The fault likely lies... in the replica data itself."

"Jade, stop," Natalia tried cutting him off.

"She was the first living being to have its data extracted; the process wasn't standardized as it is now. It was once merely... a fonon based arte. The arte... could very well have been influenced by the emotional turmoil of the one doing the data extraction, resulting in corrupt data."

"Colonel, you're opening all your wounds!" Tear said fruitlessly. "If you keep this up you're going to end up losing too much blood!"

"Last time she was replicated, she went berserk. She killed many people... No sane replica of her could ever be-"

"Jade, shut up!"

Asch's command silenced the entire room.

"I don't know what the problem is; I don't want to know what the problem is; I frankly don't give a damn!" the redhead continued. "If you don't want to see this, then I suggest you look away." Asch cocked his sword taking an offensive stance, his unwavering gaze fixed on the replica. "Because you're about to get a flash from the past."

Asch charged Nebilim, but whatever awkwardness she'd demonstrated completely evaporated once her survival instinct kicked in. She leapt gracefully, dodging the swing and landing on the blade throwing Asch completely off balance. Guy struck, forcing her to defend and drawing her nails from Asch's eyes. The blond didn't fare much better, her constant motion made her impossible to hit and the sporadic nature of her attacks left her a difficult foe to assess.

She had no logical pattern to her movements, no plans; Nebilim attacked on a whim and her dodging seemed effortless. Having felt her attacks, Asch could see now how nothing but her nails had practically torn Jade's chest open. She had a surprising level of strength, her almost dagger-like nails didn't help matters much. But if her claws were the greatest of Asch's concern he'd be content. No, much like her student, Nebilim's true strength lay in her artes and it was looking like the replica had inherited the greater portion of her predecessor's talent, with raw instinct filling in the gaps.

The only thing he was thankful for was that it seemed her array of artes was the same as Jade's; or rather, Jade's array was the same as hers. Whatever way around it was, they were familiar. Having fought alongside Jade for over a year, Asch knew the man's fononic artes inside and out, and had plenty of experience in staying out of their way. He could read the flow of fonons in the air, and knew where not to be. Thankfully her artes were no more focussed than her movements, executed more like a burst of fonons than the control and precision he'd come to expect of the Necromancer.

Natalia watched the fight from the sidelines, more anxious than she'd ever been. More than anything, she hated feeling so completely helpless. But her bow had been snapped earlier when
Sync had taken her hostage and without it she'd little to offer other than a sparse range of supporting artes. Her level of exhaustion was quickly starting to become apparent though and while she did her best to try and help Tear, she knew there was no way she could completely free the melodist, especially with such an injury as Jade's. Just stemming the major bleeding had been a chore, but the muscle damage was extensive and healing muscle was tedious at best, forget at some obscure hour of the morning after dealing with the ordeal they'd just experienced.

Luke had since taken up alongside the boys and Anise was having a difficult time getting in the fray. Instead she positioned herself in front of Dist who still sat helplessly on the sidelines, offering artes whenever she could. A good decision on her part; though with Jade's spear still in his shoulder, Natalia doubted Dist was going anywhere any time soon, it was best they ensure he not try anything. No... the Princess knew he wouldn't try anything. The man sat there in complete horror, stultified by how events had played out, perhaps even by the fact that Jade was so severely wounded. It was clear nothing had occurred as he'd imagined it would.

The fact that the spear remained in his shoulder seemed to have stemmed the bleeding though not halted it completely. The researcher had been fortunate; judging by the degree of blood loss and the fact that he remained conscious, the weapon had missed any major blood vessels. Then again, perhaps it had been Jade and not luck. Their Colonel certainly knew his anatomy enough to have pulled it off. Of course the researcher's joint had still taken quite the hit, only the skill of the healer that tended to the injury would determine how much motion he'd regain in his arm.

"Damn it! Luke!"

Guy's cry returned Natalia's attention to the battlefield just in time to see Luke misstep, taking Nebilim's arm to the stomach. What normally should have sent him stumbling a couple steps instead launched him clear across the cavern. What incredible strength! She still couldn't help but cringe at his landing, half controlled but not enough to eliminate all the damage and she could see a good gash on the side of his arm.

"Natalia," Tear began.

"Of course, you stay here," the Princess replied before Tear could say another word. It was already taking all of her focus to try and heal Jade, forget how weary she was growing. Oh she'd never say as much, but she must be as, if not more, tired than Natalia herself was. The least Natalia could do was tend to her cousin and give the melodist some peace of mind. She could handle that much.

"Sorry Natalia," Luke said, wincing at her touch. The cut wasn't too deep but he'd gotten a rock in it which would have to be removed before she could do anything about the injury.

"Don't apologize," she replied, stealing a glance at Asch and Guy, both who seemed to dance around the replica. "She's a formidable opponent. I suppose we shouldn't expect any less of someone who trained Jade, now should we?"

"Yeah... wait you-"

"It's not that difficult to deduce," Natalia replied with a smile. "Given the rashness of Jade's actions and the fact you and Asch know what's going on. I may not know the particulars but we aren't blind, deaf and dumb."

Luke managed a chuckle. "I'll keep that in mind."

"You could have sai-"
"I don't have a death wish, thank you."

Natalia simply smiled at the truth in the matter. Jade was certainly... well Jade. Luke winced again. "I'm sorry," Natalia apologized. She was far from gentle, it was taking all the energy she had just to keep her hands steady. "I'm almost done."

"Please hurry," the redhead urged, his worried eyes following the fight. Nebilim was a tough opponent at the best of times, and this most definitely wasn't the best of times. Everyone was exhausted and lacking on sleep, even from where he was Luke could see Asch and Guy slowing down. Even with Anise contributing her artes, it was only a matter of time before their sluggish reflexes put them in the line of fire. The only real question would be who would slip up first.

It was Asch.


"Jade, what are you-" Tear's outraged cry was cut short as she fell to the ground.

"Fangs of hell come forth!" Jade's incantation rang in the cavern, opening the ground from below and launching spires at Nebilim. Surprised by the arte, she stumbled, losing her balance for a split-second. It was all he needed.

Nebilim's scream seemed to completely halt the flow of time in the cavern, silencing all noise, painting a bloody tableau for all those who watched on. For that moment in time, only two beings existed. Jade stood firmly, in his hand was Tear's staff, the end of which had been driven through the replica. She bled in his arms, limply hanging over the Necromancer, her chin weakly resting on his shoulder.

"This is the third time I've killed you," he whispered. Silence encompassed the two. "...I'm sorry."

Jade yanked the staff from his opponent and she fell to the ground, a lifeless corpse, her tattered rags stained red to match the pool in which she lay.

"Honestly Jade!" Natalia chastised, breaking the overly awkward silence. "We told you to stay back; it's difficult enough to heal an injury like that without having you re-opening it at every given opportunity."

"I assure you, your concern is vastly misplaced," Jade replied coldly.

"I highly doubt that," Natalia said. "Really now, you're worse than Asch is! See you've opened them again."

The fact that Jade actually clutched the fabric over his chest concerned Natalia the most. After having made such a comment, he would most likely be doing everything in his power to prove her wrong and not betray signs of injury... she just kept forgetting that even Jade's strength wasn't endless. He likely tore it more than she'd suspected, and she didn't even want to fathom what might become of him should that strength run out before he was properly tended to.

But injury or not, Jade made his way over to the controls of the fomicry machine. With the push of a button he pulled a disk from it and with the most dangerous look any of them had ever seen on their companion, he turned to Dist.

"Is this the only copy of her replica data?" His tone alone sent a shiver down even Asch's spine.

Lifting it over his head, the Colonel threw the disk down on the hard stone, shattering it into a thousand small pieces that glittered in the pale light the fonstones provided.

"No!" the God-General cried out. "Why did you do such a thing? Perhaps this was a failure, but we can fix our mistakes next time! I'm sure if we work together we could figure something out! There's still time, the machine should still have her data input," he desperately pleaded. "We can still save her, bring her back and make things right again! We can still go back to those golden days!"

Jade stepped away from the controls towards Dist. "Guy."

"Yes, Jade."

"I don't want a single remnant of that machine in existence. Do I make myself clear?"

"A-absolutely," the blond stuttered.

"J-Jade," Dist pleaded. "What are you going to-" Dist cried out as Jade ripped the spear from his arm. The God-General sank all the way to the floor, cradling his injury.

"Stand up," the Necromancer commanded.

"Jade..." Asch began. "You're still bleeding. What are you-"

"Stand up!" he said, his voice booming across the cavern. Dist scrambled but only made it to the sitting position. "We end this here and now."

"Y-You can't possibly mean..." Dist quivered.

"Jade, no!" Asch put himself in the Colonel's path, arms outstretched in pure refusal. "You're hurt, you are in no condition for a duel. Tear and Natalia can only patch you up; you need to be seen by a doctor."

"I'm not going to a doctor, these wounds are superficial; they'll heal on their own. Get out of my way."

"No. You are getting on the Albiore, and you are going to see a doctor."

"I said no."

"And at what point did I make it a choice?"

"Asch fon Fabre, remove yourself or I will remove you."

"Tear, Natalia... I'm sorry," Asch muttered.

But before anyone could inquire the cause for his sudden apology, Asch's fist landed squarely in Jade's stomach. Blood spattered, leaving crimson droplets on the young monarch's face and the Colonel sank limply over the teen. "Don't worry," Asch whispered. "We'll make sure everything is taken care of here."

"Anise, I could use a hand," Asch finally managed.

"Oh! For sure," Anise hurried over and had Tokunaga easily throw Jade over his shoulder. "Wow I'm really impressed, how the hell did you knock the Colonel out?"
"It's only because he was actually listening to Tear and Natalia's instructions," Asch explained. "He's taken nothing but shallow breaths for a good fifteen minutes now, he didn't have much air in his lungs to begin with. Add that to the pain of his wounds all splitting open again and even someone like Jade would pass out."

"It still impressive," Anise replied. "But what do you want me to do with him?"

"Take him to the Albiore, we'll head to Baticul and get him in with one of the doctors at the castle. It's closer than Grand Chokmah and we should be pretty safe there."

"Sure thing!"

"Tear, Natalia, could I ask you to go with him?"

"Of course," Natalia replied.

"Yes, we'll work on getting him patched up," Tear agreed with a weary smile.

"Sorry," Asch offered an apologetic look. Really, he'd pretty much just put them back at square one.

"Hey, don't run yourselves ragged either," Guy reminded the girls.

"We won't," they both agreed.

"They will," Guy sighed once they were gone.

"And then some," Luke agreed. "So what are we going to do with him?" the redhead asked with a nod of the head in Dist's direction.

"Jade didn't seem too keen on keeping him alive," Asch pointed out.

"Wait a sec-!"

"Relax Luke, we're not going to kill him unless he makes us," Guy intervened. "I've got an idea if you two can stay civil for a few minutes and guard him while I run and arrange something."

"Yeah, whatever," Asch shrugged.

"He won't go anywhere," Luke stated.

"Okay," Guy said and hurried off, but didn't fail to notice neither sibling made eye contact. "Oh and you two," he added as he was almost out of the room. "We've had enough blood tonight, no more until I get back."

"Just go!" Asch shouted impatiently.

"What are you going to do with me?" Dist demanded.

"Don't move," Asch pulled his sword out and held it at the researcher's throat. "And don't look at me, looks like Guy's going be your disciplinary."

"I don't understand... this wasn't how things were supposed to be. Why... why would Jade risk his life to kill me?"

"I don't know; you're a pain in the ass?" Asch tossed out, his patience for the God-General had
apparently reached negative numerals.

"You don't know him at all," Dist spat.

"Apparently we know him better than you do."

"Ever since he was little, he's always looked out for himself," Dist continued. "He would never do anything that would put him at a disadvantage, no matter what it meant for anyone else. There's no reason why he would put his life at risk to kill me! We vowed! We'd sworn that no matter what we'd revive the Professor together. She returned... but he still..."

"I don't know, it seems pretty obvious to me," Luke said simply, his tone lacking the harsh edge his brother's held.

"What do you mean?" Dist demanded.

"It's because you're so obsessed with the past," Luke explained. "That's why you and Jade aren't friends anymore; it has absolutely nothing to do with Professor Nebilim. Jade's grown, he's moved on and put everything that happened behind him... but you haven't. You've clung so hard to the past that you got left behind."

Dist's mouth opened ready to fling a reply, but no words came. His brows furrowed in frustration but sank back in defeat. For once, the overly confident God-General had absolutely nothing to say... he couldn't even find grounds on which to protest. He had absolutely nothing at all.

The cavern remained silent until Guy returned.

The sound of clinking armour announced the blond's return before anyone saw him, but when he did finally re-appear; he had at his side a handful of Malkuth soldiers.

"Arrest him," the blond ordered.

The men moved quickly, without needing any further instruction and bound the God-General. Dist didn't try to resist, he didn't even make a fuss when the men hauled him to his feet despite what such rough handling must be doing to his still bleeding shoulder. Dist had lost, through and through.

Asch chuckled.

"I can't think of anything that could possibly be funny," Guy said with a cocked eyebrow.

Asch grinned, dismissing the last of his chuckle with a shake of his head.

"I just keep forgetting that you're nobility."
"See, now I get that Mohs is dead and that in all likelihood his New Order's gonna follow suit in the next few months. Kimlasca accidently led him to the Seventh Fonstone in attempts to prevent an international incident, but also dealt with this matter in good faith," Peony said, his authoritative voice resonating in the silent courtroom. "I also understand this solution you seem to have come up with for the miasma." He paused, letting the silence draw the tension to its inevitable climax. "But!" he boomed. "What I don't understand, is why you, Gailardia, are here reporting all of this. Where's Jade and why does he think he can skip out on me?"

A mischievous grin spread across the Malkuth monarch's face shattering any seriousness that may have lingered at the end of his demand and Guy chuckled, not because he found Peony's statement especially funny but because he really, really, thought he was about to get it. The blond wouldn't lie, he had been pretty nervous being sent here to deal with the political ends that needed tying up in Grand Chokmah. Why did Jade always manage to get out of delivering the bad news? If Guy didn't know better he'd swear the Necromancer had orchestrated the entire thing on purpose.

"You'll have to forgive him, you Majesty," Guy replied with a grin of his own. One of these days Peony's fondness of playing with people was going to backfire on him. Until then Guy could only try to meet him on his own playing field. "But Asch has the doctors in Baticul keeping him on lockdown until there's absolutely no chance he'll re-injure himself."

"Did he get himself that messed up?"

"The doctors said it was closer than we had originally thought," The blond noble replied, seriousness belying the truth in his statement. "He was lucky."

"Jeez, what a useless old cod, I taught him better than that," Peony said in mock exasperation but barked a laugh in quick succession. "Oh well, I guess I can't hold it against him, for all his talent, he's got nothing against the kid's authority in Baticul."

Guy snickered to himself, and couldn't help but wonder what Asch would think if knew that's what Peony called him behind his back. Behind him, he could hear Natalia and Anise stifle giggles of their own. The three of them had offered to report to Peony on Kimlasca's behalf, to formally straighten out everything that had happened with Mohs and the Seventh Fonstone. It had to be done, and with Jade still recovering, they'd be stuck in the Kimlascan capital for awhile anyways, might as well make good use of the time. For some odd reason Asch hadn't expressed any interest in coming along; strange from the one who could get obsessive about being on top of everything going on. Then again he probably knew that he couldn't trust Jade quite that much, especially when the man seemed to hate doctors almost as much as Asch did. No, Asch probably wanted to personally oversee Jade's lockdown.

Of course, Guy didn't mind the company of the girls, well that was as long as they stayed a safe distance away. Natalia had joined him to represent Kimlasca and to provide her own impressive political insight while Anise had just been bored. So while what Guy considered a 'safe distance' was steadily shrinking, he was thankful to be sitting with Noelle in the cockpit. The confined space made it impossible for her to spring a bear hug on him; needless to say, he spent the entire trip there.

Things had turned out well though, and despite Peony and his fondness of playing mind games, all had gone smoother than Guy could have hoped. He somehow suspected the Emperor wouldn't have such an easy time settling his council but then again he'd probably be bored if they didn't
throw him a challenge here and there. Guy chuckled again, but in all due seriousness, it was the kind of obstacle he hoped they wouldn't be encountering on a regular basis. The countries had more than enough to work through without this sort of crap.

"You Majesty, if I may," Natalia interrupted. "The other matter we wished to discuss was that of the prisoner."

"Oh, you mean Saphir?" Peony inquired.

"Yes, at the time it was easiest to put him into the custody of Malkuth authorities, but we don't mean to impose the responsibility of holding him on Malkuth."

"No worries," the monarch replied. "If you don't mind, he's already properly settled in and it would be a shame to move him."

"Yes, but-"

"We're currently holding him awaiting his trial. He's accused of stealing confidential military information, namely the replica data of Hod's citizens," Peony said with several levels of seriousness. "So unless Kimlasca has need of him..."

"No, your Majesty," Natalia backed down. "If he has reason to be here, we've no reason to request you turn him over."

"See, nothing to worry about," he dismissed the issue with a smile. "But on the topic of being settled in, I imagine you lovely ladies will be needing a place to settle in. Guy here has a nice place but I don't know how he'll manage with two ladies in his house overnight."

"Your Majesty, with all due respect half the staff that work there are-"

"We wouldn't want to impose on one of such fragile psyche," Peony cut Guy off with a sly grin. "Why don't you stay here at the castle? I've got plenty of rooms, you could have any room you like." His chin came to rest on his hand, leaving his blue eyes to land just south of the Princess' face.

Oh for heaven's sake! Natalia shuffled but his gaze easily followed her... well followed her as she moved. She was finally starting to understand why Asch always seemed strangely insistent on blocking her view during their audiences in Malkuth. He hadn't been blocking her view so much as he'd been blocking... She moved again, but again failed to escape. Did it make her a bad person to be wishing for Tear's presence right about now?

"Actually, it would likely be best if we return to Baticul as soon as possible," Natalia finally replied. "We should meet up with the others; there are still many issues that remain to be dealt with."

"Like the miasma?"

Natalia swallowed hard, though she was certain he hadn't intended it as such, Peony's comment came across more as a strong suggestion than a query. Natalia, for one, didn't like to let her mind linger on that topic for any extended period of time.

"Indeed," she answered with a nod.

"Guy, Natalia, Anise!"
"Noelle!" Guy ran to meet the pilot halfway down the carpet leading to the throne. "What's the matter?"

"Sorry," she answered, suddenly realizing the entire court had their eyes on her. "I didn't mean to interrupt anything!" the pilot waved her hands in embarrassment. "I just wanted to catch you before you left."

"No problem," Peony called. "We were pretty much wrapped up anyways. Was there anything else you guys needed from me?"

"No, I'm pretty sure that was it," Anise provided. Natalia confirmed with a nod in the former Guardian's direction.

"Then I'd best be going. I've a few other things to attend to. Give that old cod my regards."

"Will do," Guy waved back at the Emperor.

"Wow..." Noelle stood somewhat dumbfounded.

"What is it?"

"I somehow pictured the Emperor of Malkuth to be a bit more... I don't know..."


"I can't say I'd use any of those words to describe Peony," Guy laughed nervously. There were definitely days he really wished any of the above applied. Peony could be a little too... well, Peony.

"So what has you coming to meet us?" Anise asked. "Is everyone okay?"

"Asch!" Natalia gasped. Surely he wouldn't have tried to move forward with his...

"No, nothing's wrong... well at least not with Asch," Noelle said hesitantly. "I just got a message from Ginji, he said that the others are with him, and that they're headed to Mushroom Road."

"Mushroom Road?" Guy and Natalia both said in unified surprise.

"What? What's wrong with Mushroom Road?" Anise asked. "Isn't Mushroom Road in the middle of nowhere? I thought it was up north of Cheagle Woods, why the heck would they take off up there?"

"It seems that Lady Susanne fell unexpectedly ill," Noelle provided. "But I didn't get any more information than that."

"Aunt Susanne often falls ill," Natalia explained. "She's always been like that, at least for as long as I can recall. The medication they use to treat her is made from a mushroom that grows in that area."

"Yeah but they usually get a supply from St. Binah which is closer and not nearly as dangerous. Then again, the area around there suffered a lot from falling and spending so long in the Qliphoth," Guy pondered. "Besides, with the way things have been lately, I doubt there's anyone supplying the herbalists. I bet Luke and Asch decided to just go get some themselves."

"Well then, what should we do? They'll undoubtedly return to Baticul once they're done, should we just wait for them there?" Natalia inquired.

"Actually, if we leave now we should be able to meet up with them," Guy pointed out. "It's rough
terrain up there and I can't imagine the miasma's made it any less treacherous. They could probably use the extra help."

"Yeah!" Anise agreed. "Besides... I really want to help Lady Susanne too! She's done a lot for me."

"She's done a lot for all of us, I think," Guy said. "Let's go give the others a hand."

"Alright!" Noelle proudly declared. "I'll get the Albiore ready and we'll be back in the sky before you know it!"


Luke couldn't say that fog was foreign to him, he could still remember the days he'd haul one of the guards down to the docks in Baticul to watch the morning mist as it rolled in off the unusually still water. The fog there had a mystical quality, saturating the air with a mysterious magic that had fascinated him, even beyond the years he would actually admit to such things. This weather, however, didn't have any of the serenity that those mystic mornings in Baticul once had; rather, it left him uncertain, with every hair in his body on end.

To say visibility was poor was an understatement. Combined with the miasma, no one could see further than a few feet in front of their face. In completely foreign terrain with more than a fair share of monsters creeping about, was it really any wonder he was so tense? Luke had been unable to shake that sickening feeling since they'd left Baticul. To have Mother fall ill so soon after the doctors had declared Jade all better... right as they were planning to leave, it left him with an unusual level of unease. With so much miasma around, even she was starting to be affected, and she didn't recover as easily as she once had. He hated her moments of weakness; even now they still scared him. As if he needed another reminder of just how frail life could be. There had been far too much death lately... Luke just didn't want to lose anyone else. No matter what. "Never again."

"Thinking too hard as usual I see."

Luke yelped, leaping a foot in the air at the pressure of a hand coming to rest on his shoulder. His heart flying at speeds he didn't think possible, surprise melted to confusion and then to irritation as laughter quickly ensued, rising above the sound of the blood rushing in his ears.

"Damn it Guy, what the hell was that for?" Luke protested. Damn it! He had been sure everyone was in front of him! Wait... everyone was. The young noble paused for a second, taking a second look at who he was addressing. "Guy! What are you doing here? I thought you were in Grand Chokmah!"

Guy couldn't stop laughing; neither could anyone else for that matter. Luke just grumbled in annoyance. "We got your message and came to give you a hand," Guy finally managed between fits of laughter. It wasn't often he caught Luke off-guard these days. He really must have been lost in thought; that wasn't good. "Besides, in this fog its really easy for enemies to sneak up on you, you should try to pay more attention to what's going on around you."

"I'll keep that in mind," Luke muttered, every muscle in his body displaying his irritation and displeasure as he slouched on the spot.

"Come on Luke, don't be such a poor sport," Tear prodded, trying to be serious but obviously still suppressing giggles of her own. Luke muttered something inaudible but his posture improved somewhat.
"Guy's right though," Anise pointed out. "It's super easy for stuff to sneak up on you, so we really should be careful."

"And quieter," Asch grumbled, being the only one not to join in on mocking Luke.

"I'm glad we came to help. It will be more difficult to locate the mushroom in all this," Natalia stated. "I wonder if it would be best to wait for the weather to clear a bit."

"Not likely," Jade provided. "There's always some degree of fog in these parts and the chances it could worsen are greater than the chances it will improve. It would be best that we hurry rather than wait."

"Either way we ought to stay close," Tear said. "It'll be easy to get lost and even easier to get separated."

"Stay close, keep our bearings, got it!" Anise chirped.

"That might be easier said than done," Guy commented.

"Yeah no kidding," Luke agreed, starting down the path alongside his best friend.

They walked in silence at first, but it was different than the last time all of them had been together in Choral Castle. Luke let his eyes wander, tracing the silhouettes in the fog while he walked but quickly grew frustrated. It was completely pointless, he only knew what they were looking for from a picture in a book they'd taken with them, there was no chance he was going to recognize the vague shapes he saw dotting the path. Luke moved over, trying to get a closer look at the mushrooms. All spotted... no, none of these were right.

"Don't wander too far," Guy commented and Luke hurried back to his best friend's side.

"I know, but it's impossible to see anything, at this rate it'll take us days to find the right one."

"You say that like it would be a deterrent," the blond said slyly. He knew full well Luke would gladly search an area twice the size for days on end if he knew it would make his mother better.

"Yeah but..." Luke began. Guy just laughed and Luke joined him but the two were quickly hushed by the ever irritable older Fabre who trailed behind them. "Sourpuss," Luke muttered once they were out of an earshot.

"I take it the two of you have yet to make any progress," Guy commented noting the lightning bolts that seemed to fire between the siblings. If he didn't know they could block off that connection of theirs, he'd swear they were going at it while they walked along.

"Unfortunately I'm going to have to take your brother's side in this matter," Jade commented, adjusting his glasses with his forefinger. "There are enough obstacles to our mission without having monsters attracted from all over by the noise you're making."

"Since when did this become a mission?" Guy whispered.

"I think he wants to find the mushroom before Asch does and use it against him somehow."

"How is he planning to do that... or better yet, why?"

"It's Jade, and he had just gotten out of a week of imprisonment. I didn't ask," Luke whispered back.

"Fair enough," Guy replied with an understanding nod. Asch had better be sleeping with an eye
open after pulling a stunt like that... whether it had saved the Colonel's life or not. The blond heard Luke sigh and turned his head to see his best friend with a rather disgruntled look on his face and a hand on his head.

"Luke are you alright? Is your head bothering you again?"

"Huh?" Luke looked at Guy confusedly. "Oh!" Luke removed his hand from his head, revealing the fallen leaf he'd been untangling from his hair. "No, I'm fine. I haven't had any problems since Choral Castle."

"That's good to hear," the blond replied with a sigh of relief. "I'd feel better if I knew what the hell that had been all about."


"How about it Jade?" Guy prodded, knowing full well the Colonel was astutely listening to every word they said. "I know you know something."

"I'm quite certain I have no idea what you mean," Jade answered.

"Come on Jade, you said we'd discuss it later; well it's later," Guy said. "You thought it had something to do with Lorelei and the Score."

"That's correct. Lorelei was the one who originally gave the Planet Score to Yulia who transcribed it onto the Seven Fonstones. It's not that much of a surprise to see them react to something so intimately connected to their fonon frequency."

"That doesn't make sense though," Luke said. "I mean, I remember my head hurting a bit when Ion read the Score in Daath but it wasn't anywhere near that bad, and other than that I've never had any problems being around scorers when a Score is being read."

"Yes, but the single instance in Daath set aside, all the other times you were exposed to Score readings pre-date your connection with Asch, correct?"

"Well yeah but... what does that have to do with anything?"

"It has everything to do with it," Jade supplied. "Even though you have identical fonon frequencies, whether it be you and Asch or you and Lorelei, those frequencies aren't in perfect sync. This is why you haven't always had that connection of yours, at least not to the extent that you could make use of it in the way you do now."

"Then what changed?" Guy asked.

"I believe Luke could provide you with that information," Jade said with a gleam in his eyes.

"We synced them ourselves..." Luke said. "The first time we went to Choral Castle."

"Correct, and in doing so, you inadvertently also improved the degree to which you were synced to Lorelei's frequency. Now, had you done nothing, your frequencies would have fallen out of sync, as is the nature of such things. However, you discovered the extent of your connection, and chose to make use of it. Quite regularly, I might add."

"We did..." Luke confirmed, unsure where Jade was going with this.

"This is why you have such a strong connection to Lorelei that hadn't previously existed," Jade
pointed out. "Every time you utilize your connection you force your fon slots back in sync, reinforcing that path each time. Using your connection has gotten easier, hasn't it?"

"That's true..." Luke realized. Was it really that long ago? It used to take all his concentration just for Asch to be able to hear him; he had to stop and focus to be able to figure out where Asch was. Now... using it was like second nature, he didn't even have to think about it. "So because Asch and my connection is stronger, I'm also more connected to Lorelei?"

"That's correct."

"I suppose that makes sense," Guy agreed before suppressing a minor scowl. "This fonon frequency and connection stuff gives me a headache."

"It gives you a headache?" Luke jabbed playfully.

"Not the same kind of headache," Guy teased. "Maybe you should ease up on the whole using your connection thing for a bit."

"Perhaps not quite yet," Jade said with a sigh.

"What makes you say that?" Guy asked.

"Oh I don't know, I just thought it might be useful if Luke could use that connection of theirs to find where our mutual friend has wandered off to."

"Uhhh Master..." Mieu spoke up, his little paw tapping Luke's ear. "I think we're lost, mieu."

Luke and Guy both spun around. Not just Asch, but the girls were nowhere to be seen either. They'd gotten separated in the fog.

Great... just great.

"Luke! Guy! Jade!" Natalia called out into the blanket of fog that had enveloped them. She shook her head. "It's no good, they must have taken a separate path while we weren't paying attention."

"Man!" Anise whined. "We're never going to find them in all this fog! We can barely see the mushrooms at our feet, forget finding someone else who's Yulia knows where!"

"Asch, couldn't you us your connection to find where Luke is?" Tear suggested. "Perhaps if we try to coordinate landmarks we can meet up again."

"Why?"

"Why? Maybe so we can find them and not wander forever in this stupid place! We're walking in circles as it is!" Anise said. "It wouldn't kill you to help out every now and then. This whole thing was your idea in the first place."

"You don't know that."

"Yeah well unlike you, Mr. Antisocial, I actually talk to people. Yes, this is your wild goose chase."

"Please you two, now isn't the time or the place," Tear stepped in. "Asch could you please contact Luke and arrange a place for us to meet?"
"And what would be the point in that?" Asch almost growled. "We still haven't found the mushroom so it's not like we're leaving the area. We can cover more ground if we're split up and get back together afterwards."

"Fine, jeez, don't bite." Anise shot.

"Come now Asch, the two of you aren't still fighting are you?" Natalia chided. There was only one clear explanation for such illogical behaviour on her fiancé's part and judging from the awkward silence that ensued, she hit the nail on the head. "How long do you intend to keep up this ruse and keep us in the dark?"

"There's no ruse," Asch muttered. "I'm not hiding anything."

"Really, why do you insist on maintaining this ridiculous idea that you're going to kill yourself and the replicas to eliminate the miasma? It's not fair to Luke and he's quite hurt over the whole ordeal. Why can't you trust us with what you really intend to do?"

A hurt look flashed across Asch's face but in the dense fog, it went unnoticed by his companions. All they knew was the compassionless voice that managed a reply.

"What makes you think this is all some game?" He demanded. "It's not a front, it's not a ruse. It's a plan; yeah you may not like it, hell I don't either, but we don't have any other choice! Get that? There are no more options." He enunciated each word with painful finality.

Natalia was so stunned by Asch's reply that she stopped dead in her tracks. For the first time since the events at the Tower itself, she was unable to muster any form of doubt. The look on his face, the tone of his voice just wouldn't allow for it. Asch... Asch truly intended to go through with this.

"Wh-What's that supposed to mean?" Natalia yelled back.

"It means exactly what it sounded like," Asch shot.

"Asch stop this, it isn't funny anymore!"

"And at what point was it ever funny? At what point did this become your sick idea of a joke? When is it going to occur to you that if this doesn't happen you're not going to have a country left? That you're going to return to your capital and find it full of corpses. You of all people should understand the repercussions if we don't do something now! But no, you find it funny."

"Asch, stop." Tear tried to intervene. "Can't you see you're hurting her?"

"Tch," Asch spat. What in Yulia's name had gotten into him all of a sudden? Tear could barely contain the desire to knock some sense into him, but that didn't stop her from expressing her discontent. Something was wrong; he'd been completely off since the Tower of Rem. It was as if he didn't care about anything anymore... as if he'd already given up on the world and everything in it.

Natalia's fists trembled, her cheeks flushed pink with rage and she was nowhere near ready to concede defeat. "Who do you think you are?"

"Asch fon Fabre," he replied, heavily laying upon sarcasm as he stated the obvious. "Who the hell are you to think you can condemn the world?" He met her piercing glare with a frightening look of his own and Tear couldn't help but register the detachment in his eyes. There was no consideration for the damage left in his wake.
"You're lying." Natalia almost hissed. "The person I knew, the man I loved, he could never take so many lives and think nothing of it! He would never resort to such cowardly means!" Tears now streamed down her face. This was a nightmare... this couldn't be happening. The Asch she knew... he would never leave her, he could never be serious about this. Asch would never condone such a massacre... no this wasn't right! "I refuse to accept this lunacy! You're no better than Van!"

"What makes you think I need your approval?" Asch remained stone cold and unwavering as ever.

"Asch fon Fabre, I will not so much as look at you until you renounce this insanity!" Natalia stood staring him down, waiting for something, anything. A flash of remorse, a sign that he might even consider receding, anything! But all she got was the same unshaken unforgiving stare.

Natalia was broken. Even from where he stood, Asch could see that, she wouldn't continue this discussion, nor would she be able to muster any further arguments on the topic. Now that the denial he'd watched her cling to so desperately was gone, she would have to start picking up the pieces reality had made of her state of mind. She'd do it though, and she'd emerge stronger for it. He'd watched her recover from the ordeal at Choral Castle with all the grace that had made him fall in love with her. She would walk forward of her own strength, and she would be just fine.

Asch turned his back, and walked away choking back the feelings that lodged in his throat. He buried himself, refuting the small part of him that could have cried had he not denied himself such fruitless gestures since that fateful day seven years ago. Behind him he heard Natalia sobbing, probably into Tear's arms as they followed him, if only to keep from getting separated even further. Nothing but that could make them follow him now, and that was as it should be. No one else could walk the path he'd chosen. They'd finally reached the fork, and he had left Natalia crying on the roadside.

Better there than into oblivion.

*Two down...*

"Are you sure you know where the Rugnican death cap grows?" Guy asked the little cheagle.

"I do!" Mieu replied enthusiastically. The little creature was more than ecstatic to be in their company for once after having spent so long on the Albiore with Ginji and was even more excited to be helping them out. Guy supposed he could relate to some extent, he'd be pretty disappointed having missed out on all the action, but he was also glad Mieu hadn't been there. Having one more thing to look out for would have been just a bit too much. "I used to explore the forests up here, mieu!"

"Are we heading the right way at least?" Guy inquired.

"I think so, we shouldn't be far now!"

"He thinks so..." Guy wasn't too sure how much he liked the sound of that. "How are you making out, Luke?"

"No good," Luke grumbled in defeat. "Asch has me completely blocked out."

"I don't suppose yelling as loud as you can would do any good?" Guy asked.

Luke chuckled, "It might for him, but he's better at this than I am, I can't force my way in."

"Oh well," Guy sighed. "It was worth a try." Maybe this was going to be difficult. In this fog, no
kind of signal fire would do any good either. Flares might work, of course no one happened to carry them around so... Damn it! There had to be some sort of way that didn't involve wandering in circles for hours on end! If it didn't take them an hour to figure out which of the two paths before them they should take.

"Decisions, decisions," Jade taunted in a tone that could only mean he knew something the blond didn't.

"I guess we could flip a coin?" Guy suggested staring down the two trails. Not that staring down them did much good for the couple of feet that were visible. They looked pretty much identical to him.

"This way," Luke stated simply, taking the leftmost path.

"Wait, you said he was blocking you out!" Guy protested.

"He is. I can't talk to him, but I still know where he is. Well, roughly. I can give a direction at least," the redhead concluded pointing south.


"Really, I mean it. I'm sure talking to Asch is the last thing you want to do after the stuff he said to you." Guy's face darkened and his voice took on a dangerous edge. It was a conversation he'd wanted to have with Luke but on a topic he hadn't really wanted to bring up. Guy had some very potent feelings towards what had come out of that jerk's mouth and had several choice words for the older of his former patrons as soon as the opportunity arose. "You have every single right to be mad at him," Guy continued. "I can't believe that Asch dared to think he had the right to bring up some of those things. If he's thinks he's so damn perfect-"


"What?"

"I'm not mad at him because of the things he said to me."

"You're...not?"

"No, I'm not." Luke said with so much sincerity Guy couldn't even delude himself into thinking it was Luke's usual tactics intended to make the blond think he was okay when he wasn't. He...actually meant it.

"Really? Then what's going on between the two of you?"

"I'm still pissed at him, but it's not because of what he said. I mean, it's obvious the only reason he said all that stuff is because he was trying to get me mad at him. If that had been a real fight, there's no way he'd have brought up half that stuff. Asch just isn't like that. It came up because he'd thought about what he was going to say before the fact, meaning he'd planned that we would fight all along. He wants me pissed at him so I won't give him trouble about what he wants to do. He probably thinks something stupid like it'll be easier on me if I hate him. What the hell does he know?"

"But why would he do that? What does he have to gain?"

"Well Asch is nothing if not a martyr," Jade said with a sigh. "He does have a horrid habit of needless self-destruction."

"You've got that right," Guy agreed. "He's taking it too far this time though."

"Perhaps, but what alternative then would you suggest?" Jade inquired.

"Well..."

"Will you be the one to hand the world its death sentence?" the Colonel asked.

"Of course not!"

"Well then what would you have Asch do? On one hand you wish for him to stop what he's doing, but on the other hand you refuse to accept the death of the populace. Have you not seen it yet? Asch has. It's one or the other. There is no both; no pretty solution where everyone lives happily ever after. So unless you've an alternative to put forth, I suggest withholding your judgement of our young friend."

"You're playing dirty," Guy shot dejectedly.

"Such affairs generally are," Jade replied.

"Can you think of any alternatives?" Guy asked.

"Only one," he said, but elaborated no more than that.

"This way," Luke cut them off, steering both his friends on another left down a slightly rougher trail.

"So Luke, if you don't mind my asking... if you're not mad about the stuff he said to you... is there a reason you're mad at him?"

"I just... I can't accept the way he treats the replicas! This idea was so completely impossible, completely unacceptable when we thought we would have to sacrifice people but he turns around and thinks it's just fine to use the replicas! We're alive too! We're no different than people! But he treats us like nothing but objects!"

"Silly boy, when will you ever learn," Jade said with a shake of his head.

"What do you mean?"

"You understand Asch so well in some ways, but in other ways you don't get him at all," Guy said with a chuckle. All the pieces were finally falling into place, and Guy could only shake his head at not realizing all this sooner. He knew them both better than that. "First of all, you're assuming he thinks it's okay to use the replicas."

"Of course he does! Why else would he be doing it?"

"The same reason he's going to sacrifice himself: because there's no other choice left anymore," the blond replied. "You know, I think that's part of the reason he takes comfort in the fact he'll be going with them. He wouldn't be able to live with knowing he'd taken all those lives."

"Also, if it's the replicas, then less of them have to die," Jade added.
"Really?" Guy inquired curiously.

"Yes, the reason so many Seventh Fonists would be needed as a sacrifice is because the amount of Seventh Fonons a hyperresonance on that scale would consume is massive. Replicas, however, are made entirely of Seventh fonons. One replica could easily provide the same amount of Seventh Fonons as three or four fonists. Asch realized this as well: by using replicas, the number of lives that must be sacrificed is less than half of what had originally been anticipated. No small number by any means but..."

"This plan is Asch's," Guy said with a sigh. "Through and through."

"I still won't accept it," Luke muttered, but the resentment in his voice had lost its edge.

"Of course not," Guy agreed. "Who would? We need to find a way to stop him."


"No really Luke, if we have to lock him in a room and hide the key then we'll-"

"No Guy, stop." Luke's voice came from behind him and he turned to see his friend standing in the middle of the road pointing down a trail to their right. He looked different all of a sudden though, defeated somehow, and for a split second Guy wondered if it might have been a better idea to leave Luke mad at his original.

"This way, huh?" Guy shook his head, he must have been imagining it.

"They're coming towards us," Luke provided, stopping the blond in his tracks.

Luke was absolutely right and a few moments later Guy could hear the tell tale sounds of a small group working their way through the brush. There was no sound of chatter or idle conversation, just footsteps and the snapping of foliage as it was tread upon.

"Everyone's okay!" Mieu almost chirped as he bounced through the foliage towards the girls. "I was really worried!"

"We're alright, thank you Mieu," Tear replied, letting the cheagle take up residence on her shoulder.

"Luke! Guy! Jade!" Anise flew towards them, the amount of relief that Luke could sense in her strained voice left him wondering just what had gone on. Asch looked as stuck-up and prickly as always, no change. Tear seemed annoyed and Natalia looked vaguely indifferent, but her eyes still looked red, almost as if she had been crying. Luke made a mental note to sit down with his cousin as soon as he got the chance.

"Tsk tsk tsk," Jade chided the older sibling. "You certainly made it difficult for us to find you. Certainly you could tell Luke was trying to contact you."

"Asch!" Anise shouted in outrage.

"We got back together, didn't we?" Asch snapped. Yeah, Luke surmised, something had definitely happened. Asch had been nothing if not irritable lately, but he was suddenly on a whole new level. "Come on, we don't have all day," the older redhead continued. "We have a mushroom to find so we can go-"

Asch hadn't even finished his statement when Luke's shoulder met his side. Asch was sent crashing
into the brush snapping half a dozen small branches in the small ditch he'd tumbled into. Anise had to clasp her hands over her mouth to suppress her laughter. Finally! Someone gave the prick what he had coming!

"What the *hell* was that for?" Asch demanded, sitting up from where he'd fallen, twigs still tangled in his crimson locks that were now in complete disarray. Luke simply glared at his sibling, then with entirely too much self-satisfaction he knelt down over the spot where Asch had been about to step and plucked several mushrooms from the ground.

"That looks like a Rugnican death cap alright," Guy confirmed with a smug grin.

"Hey! There's some more over here!" Anise called.

"This is great!" Luke said excitedly. "With this many mushrooms Mother should be good for a long time!"

"Yay!" Mieu cheered, happily flapping his ears. "Does this mean Master's mother will get all better now?"

"I hope so," Tear agreed.

"Ugh," Asch grumbled. "Is anyone going to help me up?"

"Come on," Anise said excitedly, "Let's head back and get her her medicine!"

"Yes, we should make haste," Natalia agreed.

"Guys!" Asch called angrily after his departing friends.

"Come come now, Asch." Jade turned to look at the young noble who was still sitting on the cold ground, half covered in leaves. "We haven't got all day."

"Fine," Asch spat. He pulled himself up and brushed the foliage off his clothes. It was so stupid... why should he expect any less? This was good, wasn't it? He'd been working towards this, he was finally starting to see the detachment he'd spent so much effort breeding. So why did their disregard piss him off? Why did it feel like a kick in the gut? This was what he *wanted*, damn it!

"Are you coming?" Jade inquired.

"Yeah, yeah, don't get your knickers in a twist."

"I'm quite certain I don't have any knickers."

"Shut up," the redhead grumbled.

"As irritable as ever, I see. Have you ever considered that a sense of humour might be an asset?"

"Just... Just leave me alone!" Asch took off after the others leaving the Colonel to simply shake his head.

"When will you finally understand those feelings of yours, I wonder?"

It was almost surprising how little difference there was between a sunny sky and overcast these days, and Tear looked up at the heavens wondering just when the clouds had moved in. The miasma had become so dense that the entire world was overcast, but for all it deprived them of a
good deal of sunshine, it did little to suppress the heat that accompanied summers in Baticul. If only that summer brought with it what had once been blue skies and a fresh breeze. No, being outside was almost unbearable. Not that being indoors was much better. The toxic fog had worked its way everywhere and no degree of shelter would let one hide from it anymore.

Things were starting to look worse than any of them could have imagined... but just what could be done about it? Tear didn't want to believe that sacrificing Asch and the replicas was the only option, but it was becoming harder and harder to foster that hope. Were things truly as Asch said? Were there really no choices left, or were those simply the overeager words of one bearing a burden he couldn't stand to carry any longer?

Though no one would say it, they'd thought of nothing but since returning from Mushroom Road; Tear knew that at the very least it was the cloud looming over her own thoughts of late. Much like Natalia, the melodist hadn't truly believed Asch intended to sacrifice himself. It just seemed... unlike him somehow. True, he was always the type to suffer pain for the sake of others, but burning within him was a fire, the kind of determination that never let him back down... never let him concede, even over the silliest things. That was why... it just seemed so out of the realm of possibility that she couldn't bring herself to really believe he would give up like that.

Now it was beyond doubt, and there was absolutely nothing anyone could do about it. None of the scientists working on the matter had come up with any sort of solution, and the miasma's effects were getting worse day by day. They were out of time; it was too late to start searching for alternatives now. Tear couldn't help but wonder if that hadn't been part of Asch's plan all along.

"Your hair looks nice pulled up like that," Luke commented with a smile, coming up behind his friend.

"Th-Thank you," Tear managed, nervously fingerling the tan locks. Her cheeks flushed and self-consciousness completely overwhelmed the thoughts that had previously occupied her mind. She pulled at a strand but quickly let go, afraid of pulling it down.

"That's a really pretty barrette," Luke added, eyeing the silver rimmed blue flower that sat among her tan strands. "Where did you get it?"

"Lady Susanne gave it to me," Tear replied, still flustered. "I was keeping her company this morning and she insisted on doing my hair."

Luke laughed. "That sounds like Mother. She always wanted Natalia to grow hers out so she'd be able to do that sort of stuff."

"How is Lady Susanne feeling?"

"She's doing a lot better. She was even out of bed earlier."

"I'm glad to hear that," Tear said with a genuine smile.

"Yes, well," Jade's voice cut in. The young couple turned to see their companions standing in the courtyard behind them; Anise with the most mischievous smile they'd seen on her in a long time. What was up with her? Jade merely shook his head and continued. "Seeing as everyone is on the road to recovery, we best be getting back on the road as well."

"That's great and all," Anise spoke up, "but where are we even going? With everything that's been going on lately I'm totally lost."

"Well we know for a fact that two of the God-Generals are out of the running," Guy established.
"Dist is locked away in Grand Chokmah and Arietta is... gone," he said as gently as possible. Luke flashed him a grateful smile. "According to reports from Peony, Sync is still stirring up trouble with Score readings and I think it's pretty safe to assume that Van is somewhere on that floating Eldrant."

"Yes," Jade agreed. "With authorities from every region, including Daath, searching for him and still failing to at least report a sighting, there's little chance he's anywhere else."

"So that leaves Legretta, Cantabile and Largo, huh?" Anise pondered.

"They're probably still after the Sword of Lorelei," Tear pointed out.

"And searching for the Jewel," Luke added. "I don't think they'd still be after the Sword if they had already found and destroyed the Jewel, so it must still be out there somewhere," Luke said with a disappointed sigh.

"Perhaps that's where we'd best direct our efforts," Jade mused. "Though a worldwide search would be grossly inefficient."

"Ugh, are you guys really that thick or are you just ignoring the obvious on purpose?" Asch cut in with the irritated tone he'd become so fond of these days. Luke scowled. Yes, he had been avoiding the topic on purpose... and yes, he was getting far more satisfaction than he should from watching Asch's frustration.

"The miasma has to be dealt with," Asch stated. "Don't forget that killing the originals is also part of Van's plan. We know where to go and what to do about it, so it's time we stop putting it off before things get to the point that there's no going back."

Everyone fell silent, knowing full well the soundness of his argument. "Well then," Jade spoke up, not surprisingly being the only one completely unfazed by Asch's fervent desire to go on a suicide run. "What is your proposed plan of action?"

"We need to head back to the Tower of Rem and find out whether the replicas intend to cooperate or not."

"And if they don't?" Jade inquired.

"Then I'll figure it out when and if it comes to that. We have enough trouble without inviting more."

"What's this about the replicas?"

"Mother!" Asch stated in surprise, his voice automatically softening to a much more familiar tone. "I was worried you were planning to leave without saying good-bye," Susanne said with a smile.

"Come now, Aunt Susanne, you know we wouldn't do such a thing," Natalia pointed out. The Lady returned a grateful smile.

"Were you talking about all the replicas that were in the city not long ago?" Susanne inquired. "The girl you brought here is doing quite well; but now that I think about it, not many of them are still around these days. I wonder where they went," she wondered. "Are they doing well? I certainly hope so.

"I-I don't know where they went," Asch managed after a moment of tense silence. Why the hell
was everyone staring at him like that? "I don't know how they're doing either."

'Tell her,' Luke's harsh voice burst across their connection.

'Why should I?'

'Tell her. And tell her now because there is no way in hell I'm explaining your insanities to her after the fact. You want to do this? Then look her in the eye and tell her what you're doing. Tell her she's going to lose her son, because it is not going to be me telling her.'

'It won't matter, she'll still have a son,' Asch shot back coldly.

"See now I don't know if you're being thick on purpose, or if you're just that incredibly stupid!" Luke yelled aloud, his face completely red with anger. Was that what this was? Was that how he was actually thinking? Did he think that Luke was just some kind of replacement for him, that he'd just slide into Asch's place should the idiot kick the bucket?

"Oh who's going to lecture who on being stupid?" Asch immediately got defensive.

"Boys, please," Susanne spoke up, confused as to the source of the sudden aggression. "Don't argue."

"I'm going to, because you clearly lost your head somewhere along the line!" Luke yelled back, completely oblivious to his mother's request. Her voice was so inherently soft; Tear doubted her words had even reached their ears.

"Don't give me that crap! You're seven years too early to be lecturing me!"

"Really? You could have fooled me! You're acting like some 5 year old! You throw some stupid fit every time it looks like we won't let you have your way. You go out of your way to piss each and every one of us off because Yulia forbid should we actually give a damn!" Luke shot harshly. He'd had absolutely enough of Asch's mood swings and temper tantrums. It had taken him awhile to realize it, but all this nonsense of Asch's had made things clear as day, and Luke had finally pinpointed the reason he was so mad.

Despite everything Luke had seen, all the people he'd met, his family was everything to him. It always had been. For seven years they had been his world and he had loved every moment. Seeing the greater world beyond this place... he'd lost perspective, but that one fact still remained unchanged. They were everything to him, but the more Luke watched Asch go on... the more it cracked and the more fragile his family grew. No bloody way was Luke going to let Asch break it. He'd get through to his idiot of an older brother if it was the last damn thing he did.

"And you would know all about tantrums," Asch said coldly.

"What the hell is your problem, Asch?"

"Right so you and your self-righteous ideas are worth more than the alternative now? Who's really being the baby here? I don't see you coming up with any other ideas!" Asch shouted. "So until you've got something better than some weak pathetic excuse of an argument, I don't want to hear any crap coming from someone who couldn't even get the Jewel from Lorelei!" Asch turned his back.

"Boys, that's enough-" Jade tried cutting in.

"So you're supposed to be mister high and mighty now? You decide what's right; you call the
"shots?" Luke countered.

"Luke, please, let it go!" Tear also tried to intervene. She'd been torn at first, she knew they had to stop such pointless arguing, but she could also see the light in Asch's eyes as they fought. The fire he had lost flared and even if it was just for a moment, he seemed like his old self. But that light was gone now, and Asch was simply walking away. Enough was enough, any more was just heart-breaking.

"Who gave you the right to make that choice?" Luke demanded, his raw emotions starting to wear on him.


"Who said you could leave us?" Luke demanded, tears of rage welling in the corners of his eyes. Asch turned his head to reply, but the words he'd conjured would never come. In that moment of blind hatred, the world itself seemed to shut down.

"Watch out!" Susanne's voice pierced the air, the only sign that time continued forward. Her small arms mustered strength Asch hadn't thought they could possess and he felt the concrete as it rushed to meet him and his bewildered senses. What was going on? Why had Mother shoved- A haunting light brought all thoughts to an end, illuminating the ground on which he'd just been standing, each intricate line drawing his eyes along while a piercing terror stopped his heart.

Shimmering spears of sixth fonons glistened in the air, their light blinding Asch. Each spear crashed down in turn, their split second accuracy drawn out in all its agony skewering the woman trapped in their path. With each light that pierced her body, Susanne let out a blood curling scream that could have shattered the heavens and none could miss her writhe in agony. The spears vanished as quickly as they'd appeared leaving Susanne's body to fall limply to the ground.

"Mother!" Luke's scream renewed time's flow and he ran to her side. Tears flowed freely, dropping on the weightless body he pulled onto his lap. Grey strands fell carelessly among the red hair that was strewn across her ghost white face. There were no injuries, no blood stemming from a wound that needed healing, but she was nothing in Luke's arms, so light... Luke felt his chest heaving.

No... no no no no no this couldn't be happening! "Somebody get a doctor!" he cried.

It couldn't; it wasn't! Asch hadn't picked himself up before collapsed again to his knees, eyes wide open with shock. His arms still shaking, he crawled to his mother's side. This was- she had- for him- All thoughts came to a screeching halt, knives carving the image of his mother lying so lifelessly on Luke's lap in their place. He reached out over her but his arms rattled so hard he retracted them. Just what... what could... Not once in his life had Asch felt so powerless, even had his mind been lucid enough to realize it.

"Asch, do something," Luke begged in the most heart-wrenching cry anyone had ever heard. "Please... you have to do something!"

"I- I-" Asch stuttered, completely helpless. What could he do? He didn't know what to do... This couldn't be real, it just couldn't. This was Mother, sure she'd always been sick and weak... but she always got better. She always pulled through! Always! She would never actually leave them... she would never actually... d-die... right?"

"Please, Mother, please!" Luke sobbed into her hair, rocking back and forth. "You can't leave us,
"I-Luke," Susanne's voice was barely audible. "A-are you both okay?"

"Of course we are! See Asch is here too! We're both fine, just like you're going to be!"

"T-That's good..." Susanne replied. "G-g-goodness, don't cry." Her hand trembled as she reached up to Luke's face and weakly cupped his cheek. Her thumb motioned softly, wiping his tears away. With a fragile smile, that hand then slid down softly and fingered the locket that was dangling around Luke's neck.

"You're wearing your locket," she said tears in her eyes, "I'm so... happy."

"Of course I'm wearing it," Luke choked out, his own tears returning. "You told me to always hang onto it. I never let it go, not for an instant! And I never will! So you have to hang on!"

"Silly boy," Susanne smiled, her hand weakly returning to hold Luke's cheek and he collapsed into the gesture. "I never meant to hang onto the locket. I want you to always hold onto each other. You are each other's greatest treasure. Never let go of that." She turned to Asch and lifted her hand towards him but her strength faltered. Asch quickly took it in his own but words just wouldn't come, instead he squeezed her hand and she weakly attempted to return the gesture. Asch didn't think he could sink any further; he'd been wrong.

"So please..." Susanne continued painstakingly, fighting for air. "Don't fight anymore, okay?"

"We won't!" Luke cried, taking his mother's hand in his own. "We'll never fight again! Just don't leave us!"

"You've grown into such wonderful men..." she whispered, her pulse fluttering like the eyelids she fought to keep open. Luke choked back a sob.

"No! Mother!"

"I just wish...I-I had been there to see it..."

Susanne's hand slid from Luke's, falling to the concrete; her body fell limp in his arms.

"Mother?" Luke shook her gently. "Mother? Mother, you have to wake up!" He shook her again. "No... no..."

Heart in pieces, his burning chest could no longer remember how to draw in air. Luke pulled his mother closer but he couldn't hold in the fleeing warmth. Tears spilled endlessly, draining with them what little remained of his soul. How fragile his family, his world, had become... and in that single moment... it shattered.

"Mother!"
For Those We Love

Everything had happened so fast Tear didn't even know what to think. The last thing she knew, Luke and Asch were fighting, just as they'd done so often of late. Nothing seemed at all different or out of the ordinary, except maybe for the pity she felt for Lady Susanne who had been standing not far from them, watching helplessly and wanting the two boys to stop as much as the rest of them. None-the-less it was the same as always, just a normal, everyday occurrence... and it wasn't until it had shattered before her very eyes that the melodist realized how brittle such a routine existence had become.

The arte had seemingly come out of nowhere. Now Susanne lay dying in Luke's arms, her two sons at her side; leaving Tear's hand rattling as it instinctively came up to cover her mouth, doing little to hide her bewildered expression. Luke's heart was pouring out while Asch sat there in shock and the melodist had to tear her eyes from the sight to maintain what was left of her composure. She couldn't- Tear choked back her feelings. She couldn't afford to break down here. As a soldier, no, as Luke and Asch's friend and as someone who respected and cared for Lady Susanne as if she were her own family, she had to protect them. No matter what it seemed, that attack hadn't come from nowhere.

Tear wasn't the only one who couldn't bear to watch the scene playing out behind them, Anise had averted her eyes, but the tension that had ensnared her had yet to let go of her small frame. Natalia looked to be in as much shock as Asch was, her entire body shook and Tear doubted her legs would support her weight much longer. What startled the melodist most was the almost-surprised look she found on Jade, which spoke volumes about just how shocked he must have been. His red eyes darted around the courtyard searching for the source, betraying that the attack had evaded his notice in the same manner it had evaded hers.

The melodist was intimately familiar with the arte that had struck Lady Susanne; how could she not be? It was one of the handful she counted in her own repertoire; but it was the way it had been cast in which lay all the difference. The fonons remained completely evasive, even to the most perceptive of fonists, until the critical moment, the moment beyond which no one but Susanne had been close enough to make a difference. And a difference she had made, but it had cost her... it had cost her dearly.

"Mother!" Luke's scream sent a dagger through Tear's heart and she heard Natalia buckle with a cry that was muffled by the hands cradling her face, catching the tears that undoubtedly fell behind their barrier. It didn't take any stretch of the imagination to realize what had just transpired. Luke continued to cry, pleading with his mother to open her eyes, his weak and broken statements falling on one who could no longer hear him. This was enough! This had to stop! These endless days of suffering and pain, where laughter was such a distant memory that the thought alone made her chest ache... they had to end!

This chain of events would break here, but with them would spawn sorrow anew, and the aching regret would continue on. Because as intimately as Tear knew the arte, she also knew the way it was cast and there was only one person the melodist could think of who could achieve that degree of stealth.

"Cantabile!" Guy's demand tore through the courtyard carrying with it every bit of the rage that had consumed him. "Get out here! Now!"

"Tch," Cantabile spat as she stepped out from behind a pair of statues along the western edge of the courtyard. "Damn," she said in a far too nonchalant manner. "I missed."
"Cantabile..." Guy seethed, his mind apparently unable to formulate a proper sentence. The God-General's infamous curiosity seemed piqued by this fact, but Guy couldn't think past the sickening realization that had taken root. Her calm disposition, the raw determination in her eyes declared it as clearly as if she'd announced it herself. This was it. She'd made her move; there was no more walking the fence. It was her life or theirs.

"Oh well." She shrugged. "I got the bitch; one down either way. Too bad she doesn't come with the prize but it'll make the rest of this easier."

"What the hell... What the hell was that?" Guy demanded and even Jade was somewhat taken aback by the storm of emotions swirling around the former attendant. Such irrationality was expected of his former charges, not of him.

"That was for Hod," Cantabile answered simply, a satisfied grin spreading across her face. "And this- this is for Arietta!"

Cantabile launched herself at the redheads, both still completely incapacitated, and Guy was the first in her path, sparks flying from his blade as it met hers. His blue eyes were cold and full of a fury Cantabile had never witnessed in him. It was the kind of eyes she'd seen in Van after Hod had fallen, the kind she'd found in a mirror during those dark days, but never on him. There was always a softness to the blond even in his anger, but his once gentle light had been struck ablaze and a sick degree of satisfaction rose within her. That was the ambition he needed, the passion that would bring him down this path with her, no matter where its end may lie.

"In all the years I dreamed of this moment, I never once expected to see you standing in my way." Cantabile knocked him back but Guy's speed was all she expected it to be and he was back on the offensive before she could bat her eye. "After all that had befallen you, after losing everything that ever mattered, after watching your sister butchered in cold blood; I never dreamed you would defend these bastards! That you would fight for the sake of this murderous bitch!"

"You're wrong Cantabile," Guy replied. "She's not a murderer, she's never even dreamt of harming a soul! She's as innocent as Luke and Asch are in this! You can't blame them for the actions of their father or anyone else! You can't just dump all your feelings and all your hatred on whoever is the most convenient at the time, on whoever is the easiest to hurt! They don't deserve any of it!"

"Bullshit. What kind of lies have they been feeding you to have you spewing this crap?" Cantabile asked, her face belying the anger that took hold. "You knew it once, that's why you planned to kill them too! You understood that he has to feel the agony he visited on us, that he deserves every bit of the cruelty he so heartlessly dished out! None of them are innocent! She deserved what she got and her worthless pups are going to be next!"

"Don't you dare talk about Lady Susanne like that!" Cantabile barely parried the hit and she stumbled backwards, regaining her composure quickly enough to let the Necromancer's arte graze harmlessly by her side. She paid it little notice. Artes had always come naturally to her, be it casting or evading and she didn't fear that man's offensive. She didn't fear any of them. No, this moment belonged to her and Gailardia alone.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say I struck a nerve," the God-General taunted heartlessly. "What does it matter if I hit her or her worthless spawn? She's as guilty as the rest of them! Whether it's by ignorance or-" Cantabile let out a startled cry when a sharp fire flew up her arm and she turned her gaze to find a small knife embedded there. "Tear," she managed. "You too?"

The melodist gave no response but the fire in her mirrored Gailardia's passion. "All of you, honestly!" Cantabile's laugh was full of disbelief and her expression declaring a sceptic
astonishment that the God-General herself just couldn't comprehend. "She's a complete stranger! What the hell do any of you owe someone like her? She knowingly condoned the heartless slaughter her husband."

"Shut up Cantabile!" Guy's voice cut the God-General off, and the blond took a moment to properly settle it leaving the only sound in the courtyard as Luke's echoing sobs. "Lady Susanne wasn't guilty of anything! She was kind and gentle and reached out to anyone she thought needed it. It didn't matter if you were her own child or just some lowly servant boy; she opened her heart to everyone! She treated everyone with dignity and respect and she would never leave anyone to suffer. I don't care what sin she's guilty of in your eyes; I won't let you talk about her like that." Guy pointed his sword directly at the God-General. "You want to know what I owe her? I owe her my life."

"So," Cantabile's face darkened, "you've made your choice?"

"I have."

"Then let's test whose resolve is stronger. Whose hatred runs deeper? Yours or mine?"

Cantabile launched herself at Guy again, but the fury that had driven him before had subsided and his defence became nearly flawless. Strike for strike she was met by the man who'd been her dearest friend, and whether it was that bond that drove them or not, they danced across the courtyard in a performance to surpass all others.

Pushed to the limits of her abilities, Cantabile was exuberant, revelling in the rush that stretching beyond those limits brought with it. Flying around Tear and the Necromancer's artes, she had both Gailardia and Ion's little brat to contend with and she met them both with every drop of the power that rose from within her. A grin splashed across her face; she hadn't felt this amazing, this free since... since before Hod fell.

"I'm not leaving here until those brats are dead!" Cantabile challenged, glowing as her abilities were pushed beyond their reaches. "I'll kill them for what they did to Arietta, for what their Father did to Hod! Then I'll bring Van the Sword of Lorelei and he'll use it to build his new world! Hod will be reborn from the blood of those who drowned it. There couldn't be any better vengeance, no better redemption!"

"I'm never gonna let you hurt any of my friends!" Anise protested. "Gloomietta or not!"

"You're such a little hypocrite," the God-General shot. "You murder Arietta for killing Ion when she hadn't done a thing, now you're going to chastise me for bringing justice to the ones who actually committed a crime? Take a nice long look in a damn mirror before opening that trap of yours!"

"Anise!" Tear hurried over to the dark-haired girl who had been sent crashing across the stone. Her top was staining red from the series of cuts she'd incurred.

"I'm... fine Tear," Anise managed, trying to climb back onto Tokunaga. "Shouldn't you... shouldn't you be trying to help Lady Susanne?"

Tear bit her lip and with her eyes on the ground she solemnly shook her head. It was one thing to heal a cut or another obvious injury, but a direct hit from an arte was another matter entirely. It was easy enough if the arte incurred some obvious damage... a broken bone, a burn, anything! But ones like the one Cantabile had cast, a direct hit like that could have struck almost any number of internal organs. Without knowing what was wrong or how to assess what was damaged, it was a
shot in the dark and Tear didn't know near enough about the body to even fathom a guess as to where to start. If anyone would have been able to save her, it was a doctor. But now... and a part of her felt like dying inside for even thinking it but... now it was too late.

"No, Tear!" Anise protested when the melodist began to heal her arm. "Go do something for Susanne! Luke needs you to help her!"

"We both know I can't," Tear answered coldly.

"You have to try!"

"It's too late Anise!" Tear snapped and Anise bit back her feelings. "Even if I had the abilities to heal her... it's too late. Right now... all we can do is protect who's left."

Anise took off with Tokunaga without saying anything else, but the ferocity with which she met Cantabile again told her that the eternally chipper young girl didn't have her emotions under control any better than the rest of them.

"Ha!" Cantabile laughed with all her opponents back in the running. "If I'd known you'd be this much fun with the bitch dead I'd have killed her ages ago!"

"That's enough."

Tear spun around. She could have sworn she'd heard something coming from behind her... but no. Luke still sat there, his mother in his arms, sobbing and Asch beside them his red bangs hiding his eyes that stared aimlessly at some point on the ground in front of him.

"Tell me you've never thought it before too!" Cantabile called out. "Tell me you haven't thought the world would be better off without trash like them!"

"That's enough!" Asch was on his feet, his voice bringing everything in the courtyard to a halt. The rage rolled off him in waves and the air almost seemed to shimmer as every Seventh Fonon in the vicinity resonated with such powerful feelings. Cantabile's grin only spread wider, turning more malicious by the moment.

"You..." Asch's voice barely maintained its stability, quivering like the space around him. "I'll never... I'll never forgive you!"

Jade didn't require Luke's ability to gaze into Asch's mind to know that the young monarch didn't have a single thought in that head of his. He hadn't since the moment his mother was struck. For one such as him, who had spent the greater portion of his life hiding from his emotions, the power those same feelings held over him was indescribable. Jade watched the proceedings carefully, but Tear needn't be told to stay back. The atmosphere itself seemed ablaze with all the instability of Asch's psyche; no one dared cross his path.

Cantabile was barely able to deflect Asch's strikes, each hit coming at her with a force she wouldn't have thought possible from the teenager. Her arms burned under the intense weight of the Sword of Lorelei, the deceptively agile blade dancing around her in an almost senseless manner. With her opponent lost to his rage, the God-General could still match him easily enough, and she wouldn't cower in the face of his assault. She would never lose to someone like him! For her mother that died bleeding in her arms, for the little brother she watched drown in the miasma while she lay helplessly on what remained of her home, for the man who had a dream of a better world, she would never give in to this filth.

Predictable. Cantabile parried his strike. He was so predictable. Two more blows fell harmlessly to
the side. Completely, utterly, incredibly predictable! She dodged to the left, but he recoiled and was back on the offensive in the same way that everyone who had faced her for the last fifteen years had. Her weakness was obvious, and everyone thought they were so high and fucking mighty that they could take advantage of her because of it. Three more hits, all from the left, and all as effective as the attempts before them.

"Taking advantage of a woman's blind spot," Cantabile spat, her single visible eyebrow arched in mock disappointment. "That's some pretty dirty tactics there, but I shouldn't expect any less from you."

Asch couldn't even manage a reply through his fury, but his attacks increased in intensity, though his continuous attempts at slipping into Cantabile's blind spot didn't change, and she continued to guard it faultlessly.

"What? Did I make you mad?" Cantabile taunted. "I didn't think it was possible for someone so heartless to give a damn."

The God-General continued to dominate their engagement, staying surprisingly level headed for what they'd come to expect from her, and never missing a chance to taunt Asch for not being as such. She was adding fuel to the fire, just waiting for the burnout. A wise tactic as she had little chance of breaking through Asch's offensive in the blind rage that had consumed him, but one that had every potential to backfire. It would be a long time before that fire so much as flickered.

Asch moved unexpectedly quickly, and with a level of strategy Jade was surprised to find him capable of, he darted behind Cantabile, slipping around her left side where her eye patch made it impossible to discern his exact position. With a flick of his wrist he reversed his blade and drove it towards her.

The Sword of Lorelei was met by the God-General's katana as the sound of metal scraping metal filled the air. Cantabile slammed her hardened sheath backwards, sending Asch sprawling across the stone courtyard.

"I will never die by your bloodstained hands!" Cantabile spat bitterly, her sword raised. But before that blade had even the chance to anticipate its victory, Cantabile seized at the agony that flew through her right flank and the katana fell helplessly to the ground.

"No," Guy said solemnly. "You'll die by mine."

Guy ripped his blade out of her side, letting the blood flow and begin to pool on the ground. Cantabile managed to turn around, her golden eye meeting his and was surprised at the regret she saw there. Surprised... and yet somehow satisfied at the same time.

"I always knew you'd come back for me." Cantabile smiled weakly, her whisper trembling across the silent courtyard. "I guess this is how it was meant to be." The God-General fell to the ground, her last whispers fading alongside her last breath.

"I'm glad... it was you..."

"Goodbye... Cantabile."

Tear also bowed her head, using the respectful gesture to hide the emotions she knew she otherwise couldn't. She knew it would hurt Luke and Asch to see her agonizing over Cantabile's death, but no matter what despicable acts she may have committed, Cantabile had still been her teacher, her mentor. A woman who had been like a big sister to her and to see her lifeless like that
left a bigger hole than the melodist had thought possible. She had known this would be the outcome, had prepared herself for it since their very first encounter near Akzeriuth, but it didn't make things any more bearable. Tear was suddenly reminded of those dark days after she'd lost, after she'd thought she'd lost her brother. The seemingly intractable loss hung over her and she could be certain it wasn't the miasma that made her chest hurt.

The courtyard was silent; even Luke's sobs had quieted to dry heaves. Asch picked himself up off the ground, the Sword of Lorelei scraping against the stone while its wielder walked listlessly back towards his shattered family. Tear thought she was hurting inside; she couldn't imagine what kind of wreckage that emotional maelstrom had left behind, but she did know this much: she had never seen Asch look so lifeless. Never had his eyes been so glazed over, his face so utterly empty of emotion. His light was completely gone, and it had taken everything with it leaving the empty shell that had collapsed to its knees in the middle of the courtyard.

Luke hardly noted the sudden lack of motion, the sudden silence, nothing registered to him beyond the fragile porcelain doll in his arms. He brought his unsteady hand across his mother's face, gently placing stray strands of hair behind her ear. The pallor was so sickeningly familiar, so much like Ion that morning in his bed, Luke couldn't begin to explain the gut wrenching feeling that tore him apart from the inside out. Still on his knees, he buckled over himself, leaning precariously over his mother.

That was when Luke noticed something.

"A-Asch," Luke barely managed a croak, his voice shaking so badly what he said was almost indiscernible. He got no response.

"Asch... Asch!" Luke's breathing had become rapid, his voice tied in a minor panic.

"Asch, she's still breathing!"

"What?" The statement caught everyone's attention, and a flutter of excitement flew through them all. Asch's eyes lit up and in a heartbeat he was next to Susanne again, across from his little brother. Luke was right, it was exceedingly weak and faint, but their mother was breathing. She was breathing... she was alive... Relief crashed over Asch and he felt every muscle in his body give way, the adrenaline that had so easily sustained him before was gone, and it took every ounce of his strength with him as it faded.

"Asch what do we do?" Luke asked, overwhelmed and on the verge of tears again.

Asch looked helplessly back at him. What were they supposed to do? She was alive... but she was barely alive. Her pulse was so weak it was impossible to feel, only the next to indiscernible motion of her chest told Asch there had to be one there.

"Let me see her," Jade moved in. Luke very gently laid Susanne on the stone beneath them and shuffled over to give the Colonel easy access for his assessment.

"Jade?" Luke asked.

"Her breathing is very shallow, and her heartbeat is irregular. I don't doubt she's suffered further damage, but that is beyond my ability to assess here."

"Tear, can you help her?" Asch asked.

Tear shook her head. "No, cuts and broken bones aren't a problem but this goes beyond my
"abilities. She needs a doctor."

"Jade, you studied medicine, didn't you? Can't you do anything?"

"I'm afraid my specialty was in autopsies, and even then it's been many years since I've studied in that field. There's little I can do for her. She needs to be seen by a practicing physician as soon as possible." Jade stood up and stepped away, allowing Luke to fall back into his previous spot.

"The castle would be closest right?" Guy asked.

"It would be best not to move her," Jade said sternly. "Bring them to her."

"But that would take-"

"Now."

Anise and Tear had barely taken a half dozen steps when the door flew open, the crash of wood against the stone wall startling them all.

"What's going on out here?" Duke Fabre burst out into the courtyard, the hot air rushing to meet him when he again stepped outside. What was all the fuss about? He had been working up at the castle when a member of the guard had arrived with a message demanding his immediate return and the presence of a doctor with no explanation whatsoever. Susanne had just gotten out of bed, it couldn't be-

"Susanne!" The man spotted his wife, and the sight stopped his aging heart. Lifelessly laying on the stone between her boys, Luke's eyes red and swollen from crying; Asch sitting silently, clasping her hand... it was a scene that haunted his nightmares.

"Excuse me," the doctor barely managed, brushing past the stunned Duke and hurrying to his patient's side. As if the jostling had struck the man from his mindless state, his expression turned to one of fury and no one doubted from whom Asch had inherited that particular trait.

"What happened here?" the Duke's voice boomed across the courtyard and he watched everyone jostle uncertainly under his gaze. They all look struck, as if unsure what to say or how to say it. Who? Which one was it? Who had done this to her?

Duke Fabre stormed down the steps into the courtyard proper, scanning the people who stood there. Scrupulously assessing them, or at least, doing what little judging he could in such a bewildered state. Jade weighed the options of being the first to speak up, but if he'd learnt anything from dealing with Asch, it was always safest to be the second to speak. Someone had to come to the rescue of the unfortunate victim of the Duke's pent up fear and anger.

His eyes passed, first from Tear, to Jade himself, to Anise, then they settled on Guy. The blond had yet to budge from where he'd struck the God-General, his sword still hung weakly from his hand dripping blood from its surface into the spreading pool at his feet. Like a light going on, everything seemed to fall into place for the head of the Fabre household and the second it did, he regained some semblance of composure.

Behind the former master and servant, the doctor wasted no time gathering anyone who didn't have the Duke's immediate attention and was orchestrating moving Susanne inside. A quick assessment had declared her safe to be moved so long as it was done carefully, leaving everyone on pins and needles. Had the atmosphere not been so heavy, Jade would have been amused at the scene playing out before him. She was injured, yes, but even as dangerously close to death as she was, the Lady of the Fabre house was not made of glass. They needn't fear to so much as breathe on her as they
The Colonel waited a moment, realizing he was the last soul in the courtyard save for Guy and the Duke. A very interesting tangle, and one Jade would have liked to observe the outcome and perhaps to salvage Malkuth’s newest nobility should it come to that. Yet he had a sneaking suspicion it wouldn’t be quite that interesting, no matter how uncertain the blond appeared to be as he stared down the Duke before him. So leaving his curiosity by the wayside, Jade followed the others indoors.

"To think Cantabile got in here undetected..." Duke Fabre began after a long silence. "It's truly a testament to her skills."

"You know her?" Guy asked hesitantly.

"I kept tabs on all the known survivors of Hod, particularly those of status," he replied. "After a slaughter of that magnitude, it was to be expected that my family would be targeted. I needed to know who I was potentially dealing with, who was a threat. With her position in the Order, and with recent events, I can't say I'm completely surprised to see her behind this."

"Then you always knew about me?" The blond stated dumbfounded.

"No, you evaded my notice for quite some time; probably because you never returned to Malkuth. To think you got so close to me and my family... it wasn't until Asch asked for your father's sword that I realized who you were. I'm surprised I never noticed sooner, you truly did take after your mother."

"I..." Guy didn't know what to say. This was the worst possible place to put his foot in his mouth and his brain was giving him every indication that he was about to do so. But something else struck the blond. For the first time, he was listening to Duke Fabre speak of his family, of the slaughter on Hod, and he didn't feel that age-old fury rise within him. The resentment, the bitter desire to scream at the man not to dare speak of his parents... it wasn't there.

Guy looked down at his childhood friend, whose body still lay near his feet, her blood darkening as it began to dry out in the summer's heat. Was this her final gift to him?

"She was someone important to you wasn't she?" The Duke asked.

"Yes, but... our paths separated a long time ago," Guy answered simply.

"Thank you," the older man said, extending his hand.

"What?" The former servant said, though he berated himself for it a split second later. He was so caught off guard by the sentiment; part of him was still waiting to be reprimanded. But the expression on Duke Fabre’s face wasn't one of anger or spite. Behind the fear and uncertainty that disguised the proud, over-confident man he had always known, there was a look of respect.

"You protected my family, even though you had every reason to let them die. So for that... I thank you."

"No." Guy shook his head and accepted the Duke's hand. "I had every reason to protect them."

And with that simple gesture, Guy finally put the last of his past behind him.

"I hope Aunt Susanne will be alright." Natalia was the first to break the tense silence that blanketed
the five companions sitting in the drawing room. Susanne had been successfully moved from the
courtyard to her room but with all the doctors and servants swarming over her, they had decided it
best to remove themselves from the panic. There was nothing more they could do for now but pray
to Yulia that she would pull through.

"I'm sure she'll be fine," Tear said as reassuringly as she could. Natalia sent her a grateful smile.
The poor thing, she was trying to be strong for them but for all she was hiding it, Natalia knew
Cantabile's death must have hit her hard. Guy as well, no doubt. The God-General had been a
cherished person to both of them. Natalia silently cursed. For what purpose was all this senseless
fighting? How much longer did such tragedies have to continue?

"I just don't get it," Anise spoke up. "How the heck did Lady Susanne notice that arte when none of
us did?"

"It isn't as if we didn't notice..." Natalia began.

"It was just too late to do anything by the time we did," Guy finished.

"And it's not exactly like we were paying attention," Tear pointed out. "Cantabile was also the head
of the Special Operations division and specialized in undercover affairs. She excelled at covert
missions and was well versed in stealth."

"Yeah, I mean I know we let our guard down trying to break up the magic duo," Anise agreed.
"But that still doesn't explain how Susanne, who has no military training whatsoever, caught on
fast enough to react. I mean, the Colonel didn't notice until the last second!"

"Don't be so quick to under-estimate her," Jade spoke up.

"What do you mean?"

"Jade's right," Guy agreed. "Lady Susanne may not have succeeded the throne, but she was still a
princess of Kimlasca. At the very least she would have received the same sort of training Natalia
has."

"That's correct," Natalia confirmed. "She is quite skilled with a bow herself. I recall her filling in
for one of my instructors when they were ill. Her weak disposition makes her ill-suited for battle,
but she would have been taught self-defence and there's no doubt she would be able to recognize an
incoming attack."

"She noticed Cantabile's attack the same time the rest of us did," Guy stated. "She was just the only
one close enough to do something about it."

"Mieuuuuu," the little cheagle hopped down off of Tear's shoulder, his ears sagging down to the
carpet. "I really hope Master's mother will be okay."

"We all do, Mieu," Tear replied.

"They have some of the best doctors in the world in there with her," Guy said comfortably. "If her
will is any indication, she'll be just fine."

"Then I pray that her will is all that is needed," Natalia said, taking a deep breath to loosen the knot
in her chest.

"And that fate be on our side."
Luke and Asch both paced outside the door to their mother's room, the frivolous motion doing nothing to dispel the nervous energy. It was that same nervous energy that had very quickly gotten them both kicked out of the room as the doctors tended to their injured mother, leaving them to worry themselves sick (and Luke had been sick) in the hall.

All but one of the doctors had left now, none of which would divulge any details about what was going on inside, which only fuelled their fire. Was it a good sign? Or was it just delaying the inevitable announcement that help had come all too late?

"She'll be okay, right Asch?" Luke asked hesitantly.

"Damn it Luke! That's the eighth time you've asked me!" Asch snapped. "Just shut up, will you?"

Luke bit his lip and Asch instantly regretted his words.

'I'm sorry,' Asch said softly. 'I don't know any more than you do. I'm just...'

'It's okay, I'm scared too.' Luke offered a consoling smile. Asch returned the gesture but neither was really reassured.

The door to their parent's room finally opened, the last doctor and their father coming out before quietly shutting it behind them. "Father!" Luke ran up to the two of them, Asch not far behind him. "How-"

"She's alright for now."

The relief that Asch felt wash over him was unlike anything the 18-year old had ever experienced. Every problem that had burdened his mind for the last few months completely vanished and he could feel the exuberance coming from Luke. For once... for once hope hadn't been completely futile. After watching things backfire one after another... to go from bad to worse and constantly blow up in his face... to have something go right, there were no words for how incredible that felt.

"Can we go see her?" Luke asked trying to keep his excitement in check.

"You may..." the doctor began hesitantly. "However, you should know that while she is alive, she is currently in a comatose state."

"A what?"

"It means she won't wake up," Asch explained.


"The arte that hit her did extensive damage to both her heart and her lungs. Right now neither is functioning at their optimal level and she's extraordinarily weak. Her current state is exceptionally unstable. It would only take a single upset and she may never regain consciousness." Neither boy knew how to reply.

"I will send for a nurse from the castle," the doctor said to Duke Fabre. "I'll have someone watching her around the clock."

"Thank you," Duke Fabre replied.

"I should warn you not to get your hopes-"

"I have full faith she can get past this," the man cut him off.
"Yes, with you three at her side, I'm certain she will." With a quick bow, the doctor left.

"Come on Luke." Asch motioned, his hand clasping the gold handle on the door. "She may not be awake, but she can hear us, I'm sure she wants to know you're okay after all that crying you did," he added, a weak attempt to lighten the mood.


"What is it, Father?" Asch asked coldly.

"Ingobert told me what you intend to do with the replicas and the miasma. That you intend to sacrifice yourself as part of some plan to get rid of it."

"Yeah, what about it?" The redhead glared defensively.

"Don't." Their father's simple reply caught the older sibling off guard.

"And since when do you give a-"

"If not for me, then for her!" Duke Fabre cut his son off, failing to disguise the pleading tone in his strained voice. His hand almost trembled as he pointed at the closed bedroom door. "If she were to lose you... if we were to lose you," he said solemnly. "There would be no recovering."

"So you're going to blame that on me too?" Asch snapped, his voice shaking. "When it's already my fault she's like that to begin with? I was the one Cantabile was aiming at, I should have been the one to get hurt!"


"It's my fault Cantabile was even here to begin with! If it wasn't for me and this damn sword then no one would have to have gotten hurt! I'm the one who brought her here!"

Duke Fabre took a single breath once Asch finally paused, his intense gaze fixed on his son. "If you honestly believe that this is entirely your fault, then you have absolutely no right to be the future ruler of this country."

"What?"

"You are not the only person involved in all of this! This is not solely your venture; everyone is implicated, be it the researchers in Sheridan, or Ingobert and Emperor Peony and their fight for a lasting peace, they have all dedicated themselves into finding a future for this world. The way you constantly insist on trying to go at it alone is a slap in the face to everyone who has been supporting you, and to all those who pray for a brighter future. Susanne did what she did because she loved and believed in you, blaming her actions on anything but that is an insult!"

Asch opened his mouth to reply, but the words wouldn't come. What... what could he say to that? He wasn't thinking of others? Of course he was thinking of everyone! Of course he was considering their feelings... wasn't he? Who cares anyway? Since when did Father-

But that thought came to a sudden halt and the look on his father's face struck him like a brick to the chest. He wasn't saying that stuff to try and put Asch down, or to try and expose the redhead's flaws... He was bothered. Asch's entire perspective shifted and he suspected he was finally starting to see what Luke had always known. Father was saying that because he cared.

At that simple realization, a part of him flared, and all the resentment, the bitterness he'd always
felt towards the man surfaced. He'd never cared, always abandoned his sons for nothing, spent his entire life pushing them away because... because... no, Asch couldn't delude himself anymore. It was the same path with which he was all too familiar, but one he'd never have understood had he not walked it himself. They'd been pushed away because their father was scared. He'd always known about Akzeriuth, hadn't he? It was easier not to care, than to face that insurmountable loss; to accept that hatred, then to let the heart be torn apart.

Maybe it was time to put that resentment behind him.

"I'm sorry!" The door at the end of the hall flew open and King Ingobert hurried in. He was as dishevelled as either Luke or Asch had ever seen him, not that the fact he was bent over himself trying to catch his breath helped that perception. "I came... as soon... as I heard," he managed between breaths.

"Are you alright?" Luke asked, noticing the hand that firmly clenched over the King's chest.

"I'm fine," Ingobert dismissed his nephew. "How is Susanne?"

"She's alive," Duke Fabre replied, "but she's not past the worst of it yet. I have faith she'll pull through this, though."

"Yes, she's never been one to give in without a fight," Ingobert agreed.

"She's never been one to give in at all," the Duke retorted, and the two men chuckled at some shared joke.

"I'm glad to see the two of you are alright as well," Ingobert said to the boys, both who averted their eyes. "Try not to worry for your mother, she'll rest more soundly knowing the two of you are out there doing your very best."

"I don't even..." Asch began but trailed off.

"Perhaps this isn't the best time, but..." the king said hesitantly. "Daath is holding a funeral for Fon Master Ion. I think you and your friends should attend in my stead. He would have wanted you to be there."

"But Mother-"

"Go, Luke," Duke Fabre cut off his son's protests. "Your uncle is right; Susanne won't get any better if the two of you are just sitting over her worrying. Have faith in her as she has in you."

There was a long silence.

"Alright," Asch finally agreed.

"Why don't you go discuss it with your friends?" Duke Fabre suggested. "You can go see your mother after that."

"Okay, we'll be back in a little bit," Luke said, and both boys slipped out into the drawing room without a sound leaving emptiness to echo down the hallway.

"How are you holding out?" Ingobert asked once he was certain the two boys were truly gone.

"Damn it!" Duke Fabre's fist smashed against the wall before he sank helplessly to his knees. Ingobert placed a comforting hand on his shoulder but said nothing. Sometimes, there were just no
words.

"I can't..." the Duke finally managed. "I almost lost her Ingobert, I can't..." He shook his head.

"I can't lose one of them too."
A Path, A Future, and Those Left Behind

A choir of young voices carried their melody across the otherwise silent chapel, the music resonating to the vaulted ceiling. It was a song of mourning, one Luke had never heard before, but it was gentle, befitting his friend to whom it was dedicated. The young noble had never attended a funeral before, but even so, he knew that this was a ceremony the likes of which none here had seen in their lifetimes. White lilies painted every corner of the chapel, broken only by rosemary, the traditional symbol of remembrance. The afternoon sun had slowly begun its decent, sending rainbow light through the stained glass windows, the only colour on an otherwise plain casket that lay near the altar.

Ion wouldn't be found there though. While it was tradition in Daath that Fon Masters were buried and a small monument was put up in their honour, Ion had been cremated and already put to rest in a small graveyard where he would remain undisturbed. Tritheim had been worried with the radical changes Ion had introduced to the Order, that a public burial site may not be safe. Luke agreed and was glad Ion wouldn't have to worry about being bothered by some Score-driven idiots, but knowing the casket was empty made the ceremony seem less genuine.

The only sound in the chapel was that of muffled sobs, and the mourning weighed down an already heavy atmosphere as the choir slowly faded away and Tritheim began a sermon detailing Ion's accomplishments. Not all the accomplishments were Ion's, of course, some were probably his original's but it didn't matter. Luke wasn't even listening to the words, only the sound of a voice registered as it changed tone and pitch. Tritheim was a good speaker, had it not been the funeral of one of his dearest friends, Luke probably could have easily listened to him. But the Maestro's talent was lost on a crowd such as this one, his words only intensifying the sorrow that swept through the mourners.

The weight on Luke's heart wasn't unfamiliar, he'd felt its constant presence since the day his mother had been attacked in courtyard, since the moment her life teetered on the edge of a knife only waiting for the right moment to falter. The burden had gotten lighter over the past couple days, but its intensity had been completely renewed by the services he now sat through. Did the others in this chapel feel the same weight he did? Did the crowd, so large that it filled the chapel, the cathedral's entrance and spilled out onto Daath's streets' feel the same agony he did when they thought back on the person Ion had been? Did they know the gaping hole he had left behind? Luke doubted it. They mourned the figure, not his friend.

Luke instinctively reached down to his lap but was startled for a moment to find nothing there. It surprised him how much he missed Mieu's presence, how much he had valued the little cheagle's comfort without even realizing it. That was how life seemed to work though; you didn't realize what anything meant to you until it wasn't there anymore. Mieu had volunteered to stay in Baticul, knowing how hesitant and afraid Luke was to leave his mother there alone. Luke had been surprised, but he couldn't entirely blame him for his choice; he knew Mieu hated constantly being left on the Albiore even if it was for his own safety. The young cheagle couldn't stay safely on someone's shoulder during battle, and the defenceless little creature made for easy prey. Three times now, he had almost become some monster's lunch, with the third time being far too close for comfort. Luke may have found him annoying at times, but he wasn't going to let Mieu get hurt, so while he was sad to leave his smallest friend behind, he didn't issue any protests. No more of his friends would die... no matter what he had to do.

Still, if nothing was done, more than just his friends would die. The thousands of people here didn't even begin to approximate the death toll if the miasma was left to linger, but what could they
do? Asch hadn't spoken a word about it since their father had pleaded he reconsider, but it didn't change the fact of the matter: there were no options left. They weren't any closer to finding the Jewel of Lorelei and even if they did and could somehow free said being in record time, there was no guaranties that Lorelei could even do anything to change the situation. He hadn't been able to eliminate the miasma in Yulia's time, what could possibly be different this time around?

What would Ion have said? Luke watched the proceedings before him, a second wave of grief hitting him as he yearned for his friend's advice. Ion had always known what to say. Even if he didn't have the answers, he knew how to help Luke feel better, or what to say so the redhead could think it through properly. What words would Ion offer him now? What would he say if he knew what Luke had been thinking, in those dark corners of his mind where even Asch couldn't reach?

_I... wanted my life to have more meaning than simply the purpose for which I was created. I feel that being able to help you and to save Tear was the true reason for my existence... so please don't be sad..._

Luke knew the answer though. Ion had wanted everyone to be happy, to live free of burden, be it the Score or illness or grief; he wanted to see their care-free smiles light up a world he found stifling. Through everything, Ion had fought to find his own reason for being; as a replica and, like Luke, he'd sought a future that was not his original's. In the end, he had succeeded. He had found a purpose to his existence, and his life continued on through the one he had saved.

_Twei Rei Tsuae Croix Ryo Twei Tsuae..._

Tear's hymn echoed through the chapel, its powerful melody entrancing the mourners and gathering their feelings, leading them as the song drew those emotions along the room's spiralling heights. It had been Anise's request that Tear sing her fonic hymns during the ceremony. She had been reluctant at first, especially given the massive audience; but she had finally conceded to Anise's pleading and Luke was glad she had. Ion had so loved her songs. It would be her final gift to their companion and to no one but Luke, it was a testimony to the life Ion had left behind; a life as beautiful and pure as the song she sang. Enraptured in her melody, the massive crowd faded away and nothing existed save for Tear and Ion; a final farewell, her final act of gratitude.

The end of the sixth hymn slipped away and Tear glided effortlessly into the seventh but the beauty and entrancement of her song vanished. Though her voice never faltered, and the melody rang true, there was no power behind the hymn anymore. Luke knew the reason... Tear still didn't understand the meaning of the final hymn. He'd watched her struggle, even though she'd managed to solve both the fifth and sixth hymns, the seventh and final piece remained elusive as ever; and it was obvious. Though her voice was as beautiful as it always was, she may as well have spoken the words.

She would solve it though, Luke knew she would. She would never give up, and she had an entire lifetime to find the answers she sought. Thanks to Ion... she had time, she still had her life, and Luke had learnt very quickly that there was nothing in this world more valuable. There was no greater gift that you could give someone. To open for them the door to tomorrow, to that next sunrise...

One life for another's... an unimaginable sacrifice for the world he had believed in...

With the Grand Fonic Hymn still hanging over them all, the ceremony ended.
been allotted, she was more than happy to be out of there. She had lived here her entire life and she had never seen so many people in Daath. All the inns were packed full and even Daath's massive cathedral was almost at capacity; really it was a miracle they weren't sleeping on the street. But even with all seven of them sharing a room, Anise was incredibly relieved to be in some sort of sanctuary away from the flowers and mourners and constant reminders of the massive hole in her life. She was sure her eyes were still red, but if they were no one said anything. The former Fon Master Guardian wiped them one last time for good measure and sat up from the bed she had promptly collapsed upon.

Everyone looked pretty rough, except for the Colonel who wasn't fazed by anything. It was almost annoying, but Anise was far too emotionally worn to bother expending energy on such a futile pursuit. She'd just end up losing anyway and leave him all the more amused for her attempt. Luke looked as bad as she knew she must look and even Tear seemed more down than usual. Silence sat tenuously over all of them because they all knew exactly what they needed to talk about. It had been put off in light of Ion's funeral... but now there was no avoiding it. Well, someone had to start the conversation, or they'd sit like this all night, and that just might be worse.

"So..." Anise said hesitantly. "What now?"

Silence.

"We can't put off dealing with the miasma any longer," Asch finally stated. Anise wasn't the only one to note that it was the first time he hadn't said it like he'd a stick up his butt. His usual high and mighty attitude had disappeared the day their mom had gotten hurt, and now he just seemed down all the time. Apparently this topic was no exception. "I was talking to Uncle and things are really starting to get bad," he continued. "More and more people are getting sick by the day; healthy people are starting to sick. If we wait much longer, it's not going to make a difference. Van will have won."

"But... what are we going to do about it?" Tear asked.

"I'll head to the Tower of Rem," Asch began solemnly. "I'll talk to the replicas and see what they--"


"Luke..." Asch said, exasperation in his voice, but Luke met his eyes and shook his head.

"That's not what I'm getting at. Back when we got split up at Mushroom Road, Jade said that there was only one alternative to Asch destroying himself to eliminate the miasma... well I'm taking that alternative."

"Luke..." Jade said warningly.

"You mean there's another option?" Natalia almost pounced onto the Malkuth Colonel who suddenly found himself under attack by his overeager colleagues.

"I remember you saying that!" Guy exclaimed "I didn't think to ask since I figured you'd bring it up once we were together again. Then everything happened and I'd forgotten."

"You figured out another way to get rid of the miasma? Way to go Colonel!" Anise cheered.

"What is it? What's this alternative?" Tear inquired.

Jade sighed but said nothing, his stern gaze falling disapprovingly on Luke. Everyone's excitement slowly dampened as silence filled the room, the bustling energy fleeing as quickly as it had come.
Only Asch had a dark look on his face.

"Jade..." Natalia finally spoke up. "What is it?"

The Colonel let out another sigh. "The only way to eliminate the miasma and have Asch come out alive... is if Luke dies instead."

"What?" A unanimous cry filled the room.

"Colonel!" Tear was the first to voice her outrage. "How could you even suggest such a thing?"

"Absolutely not!" Natalia wasn't far behind the melodist. "I refuse to accept this! There has to be some other way!"

"You bastard!" Guy yelled. "How could you tell Luke to go die like that?"

"Stop it you guys," Luke cut in. "Don't take it out on Jade like that. I knew that was the other option long before he said anything. You heard Asch, we've reached the end, there's no time left anymore. We keep waiting and everyone dies. I've thought about it a lot over the past few days, and I've decided. This is what I want to do."

"You idiot!" Guy's voice filled the room. "That's what's been on your mind all this time?"

"Hah!" Asch erupted from across the room, "Who the hell do you think you are? What makes you think a pitiful replica like you is even capable of-"

"Shut it Asch," Luke cut his brother off sharply. "I know what game you're playing and it isn't going to work this time. I don't care what you think of me; I don't care if you never forgive me for doing this. You can yell at me, we can fight, hell, you can hate me for the rest of your life if you have to... but you will have a life!"

"No." Asch stared Luke down with the most absolute glare anyone had ever seen. His response was simple, he absolutely wouldn't allow it.

"This is really simple Asch," Luke replied calmly. The strength of his resolve and the steadiness with which he met his sibling's protests belied how mentally prepared he was to accept this fate. Guy didn't want to believe it, but his resolve was completely unwavering. How long had he been seriously considering this?

"No matter what we decide now, I'm coming to the Tower of Rem too," Luke continued. "So either you let me do this, or I vanish with all the other replicas."

"That's right!" Natalia exclaimed. She couldn't believe she'd overlooked such an obvious fact. Luke was a replica just like the others. If he was present when Asch used his hyperresonance, he would get caught up in the reaction as well.

"You can't!" Asch protested, the desperation starting to show in his voice despite his best attempts to reel it in. He could just feel every ounce of terror he'd ever felt surge and it was all he could do not to lash out and make things worse. No way. Absolutely not. Luke was not going a step further with this. "It won't work Luke! We can't both vanish! Someone still has to free Lorelei and stop Van!"

"Then you don't have much choice, do you?"

Asch stood there defeated, his mouth hanging open for a moment as the reality of the situation was
starting to sink in. No... no no no. If there was ever a fight he was going to win it had to be this one. Someone... anyone... side with him.

"I'm afraid I have to side with Luke in this matter," Jade said calmly, adjusting his glasses so the glare hid his eyes. "We can't afford to lose both Luke and Asch. If it's Luke or both of them, then there isn't a decision at all."

The door to the room slammed shut, Guy vanishing from their presence. Asch bit the inside of his cheek, the pain grounding him, but doing nothing to help him with his predicament. He couldn't think, he couldn't process anything through the rage and sheer frustration that seared through his veins. He knew he wouldn't be able to win now... not with Jade backing Luke. Why? Why would Jade side with Luke like that? Why was this happening? No. This absolutely was not how things were going to happen! This was not over.

Asch followed behind Guy, equally furious as the door slammed shut a second time. Luke stared at the floor, hoping to find some kind of answers hidden in the carpet's decorative swirls, but finding nothing. Just a spiral that led his eyes on a journey worthy of the sudden bout of nausea he felt. He'd known this would happen, he'd known there would be nothing but rejection... that every support he'd always counted on would be kicked out from under him. But knowing didn't stop the plummet. Everyone was looking at him; he could feel their gaze burning holes through his head, only adding to the weight on his shoulders. He just couldn't...

"I- I'm sorry," Luke said with a shallow bow to avoid looking anyone in the eye. "I just... need some time to think."

And with that Luke slipped out of the room, leaving behind hurt friends and unanswered questions.

The sun had set several hours ago leaving nothing but moonlight to fill the chapel. The entire place was empty; of people, of decorations, of flowers, of life... if Anise hadn't been there herself she wouldn't have believed everything that had happened just that afternoon. Part of her was glad to see it all gone. She hated the living reminders that she'd lost the only person she'd ever really loved, but part of her was also sad to see it go. How quickly the world just moved on. Would it be the same with Luke? Would everything just fall back into place, as if he'd never existed at all? Was that all that this stupid, good for nothing world had to offer these replicas... the people that she cared about?

"Why do you keep taking people away from me?" Anise yelled into the emptiness.

The moonlight offered no reply.

Damn it all! Anise cursed, unsure exactly who it was she was cursing. Fate, Yulia, Lorelei... whoever set off this chain of events then sat back to watch and laugh at their misery. First it was the person she'd loved and now... now what? Anise's thoughts came to a halt. What was Luke to her? It wasn't like she'd ever really loved him; despite all the times she'd joked around about marrying him or Asch for their money, it wasn't like she'd ever really meant it... entirely. Of course she'd gone and picked the one who was already getting hitched, just her luck, but it was probably for the better. She never really thought of either of them that way. Then... how did she think of them? Like friends? What was Luke to her?

He was less stuck up than Asch was, and even though he used to be really stupid all the time, Anise couldn't deny she'd always loved talking with him. He was so easy to talk to, she'd opened up to him so quickly... he could make her smile or laugh... he was like, like a brother. Anise never had any siblings, she didn't know what it was like, but if she tried to imagine having a brother, someone
like Luke is all she could think of. Is that why it hurt so bad to think of him going away? To think of either of them going away? With her parents gone... her friends were like the only family she had left. Now... she was losing them too... why?

"Anise." The startled voice came from behind her. She turned around to see Luke standing not far from the chapel doors. "I'm sorry; I didn't realize you were here. I'll-

"Get over here," Anise said sharply. Luke complied without a word. The two stood silently before the massive stained glass window. The sight of Ion's coffin still emblazoned in both their minds, Luke and Anise stood respectfully before the now empty altar, a couple feet from where it had once lain. Neither knew what to say but there was no awkwardness between them. Uncertainty perhaps, or maybe Luke was just anticipating the inescapable tirade, but there was a level of comfort whatever bond they shared allowed them. Luke knew he deserved what she'd say, and owed it to her to listen.

"Why are all of you the same?" Anise finally asked.

"What do you mean?" Luke asked curiously.

"All you replicas. You're all the same! You don't give a damn about your lives!" Anise turned to face Luke, her livid brown eyes meeting his sorrowful green. "You're not really planning to do this right? I mean you've got to have something else up your sleeve. You're just getting back at Asch, right? Right?"

"I'm sorry... I wish I could tell you I was."

"Are you really serious? Are you really planning to die like Asch was? This is your grand plan to save the world?"

Luke looked away. "I'm sorry."

"Don't give me that! You think 'I'm sorry' is good enough?"

"No, I don't; but it's all I can say. We're out of options and wishing it away isn't going to do anything. We can't fail after coming this far. Too many people have already sacrificed themselves for our cause, died because they believed in our idea of the future..." Luke looked longingly to where the casket had lain earlier. "I won't let that be for nothing. I won't let that dream die."

"Ion was the same," Anise conceded. "He was always so reckless. I couldn't believe it. I mean he was always so quiet and reserved in Daath, I hadn't ever really thought about it. But looking back now, even then he had no respect for his own life."

"I don't think it's that he didn't respect his own life," Luke replied. "I think he just valued others more."

"That's a load of crap! Don't try and justify yourself by saying you're doing this for others. If you valued others, you'd stop and think about what this is going to do to all of us!"

"I know what I'm putting you through..."

"Do you?"

"I'm... I'm sorry."

"Well... at least you're handling better than Asch did," she conceded. "I'm still not going to accept

"You're not the one who has to live with it," Anise shot back. Luke fell silent.

"Can you do me one last favour?" Anise asked.

"What's that?"

"Tell me why he did it," she barely whispered.

"Why who did what?"

"Tell me why Ion died. I know you really know what happened. I know you're the only one who knows what really happened. Please! I have to- Please... tell me."

"Why would you think I know that?" Luke asked, trying to avoid looking her in the eyes.

"I know you do. The more I think back on it, think about how you acted while I fought with Arietta, how you kept trying to stop me. You knew it was wrong, that there was no possible way she was guilty... because you know the truth!"

Luke froze. She'd pinned him. "I... can't," he finally replied. "I gave Ion my word that I wouldn't say anything. He did... ask me to tell you something though... two things, actually."

"Then why haven't you?" Anise demanded.

"I was waiting for the next time that we were in Grand Chokmah together... but now..." Luke trailed off and Anise couldn't for the life of her figure out what Luke was trying to get at. What could he possibly have to say that needed them to be in Grand Chokmah of all places? The redhead stared at the ground, pondering something so Anise refrained from asking him to explain.

"Ask Peony... he'll be able to tell you," Luke finally said. "Ask Peony about a message f-from Ion, he'll know." Anise noticed how shaky her friend's voice had become. Was the reality that he wouldn't be with them next time they were in Grand Chokmah starting to hit him?

"I didn't mean to bother you," he managed, as he ducked away, looking for the nearest escape. "I'll leave you be."

"Luke, wait!" Anise yelled after him, stopping the redhead at the chapel's doors.

"What was the other one? The second message Ion asked you to give me?"

Luke took a deep breath, and Anise had never feared anything her friend had to say until this moment. The grief on his face hit her just as hard and when she saw him smile, despite being terrified to his very core, she knew she had tears in her eyes again.

"He said to tell you he was sorry... and..."

"And?"

"And that he loved you."

Luke quietly closed the chapel doors behind him, taking a deep breath to try and calm himself.
down. He had just been looking for a place where he could quietly think, but in retrospect he should have known he'd find Anise there. He shook his head in attempts to clear his head again. He had known this would be the hardest part of his resolve, but he hadn't even begun to fathom just how difficult facing everyone would be. Just speaking with Anise had been a quick reminder of how deeply he'd cut everyone, and at a time they'd been emotionally vulnerable to begin with.

"Luke!" The redhead looked up to see Natalia approaching him. He quickly took another deep breath but the anxiety still clung to him. He couldn't let them see how bothered he was, it would just give them more reason to try and talk him out of it. He wouldn't- no he couldn't! He couldn't let them convince him otherwise. He knew this was what he had to do, he just... it was so much harder when he had to face up to everything he was sacrificing. "Luke," Natalia repeated. "May I have a moment?"


"Don't you 'what's up' me, you know exactly what I want to speak with you about." Oh great. Luke felt a horrible sense of dread crash over him. He didn't exactly expect her to be rejoicing, but she was angry. She was really angry. Fighting his childhood instinct to run and hide when she got in these moods, he did the next best thing: he played dumb.

"And what's that?"

"You... You are just as terrible as your brother is!" Luke couldn't resist a smile, but this only further fuelled the unusually livid princess. Luke took a step back under her intensified glare. Why was she so upset? This seemed like more than resenting his choice to take Asch's place... What else was there that had her so mad and almost defensive? Wait...

"What, in any of this, do you find funny?" Natalia demanded.

"Sorry, I was just thinking of how many times you've said that to me; it's the first time I actually agree with you." Natalia let out a frustrated sigh.

"I haven't spoken to Asch in over a week now," Natalia stated. "I was so furious with him, about this ridiculous plan of his. I told him I wouldn't say a word to him until he renounced it, and even with everything that's happened I've held to that. But you! Never, in all my lifetime did I expect you to follow this same path! To go along with his insanity! Luke how could you? How can you value your life so little that you can throw it away so easily?" Natalia's voice echoed in the empty entrance hall.


"What?"

"At least a part of you is. You're glad Asch isn't the one that's going die."

"Absolutely not!" Natalia violently protested. "Both you and Asch are irreplaceable to me! Don't even suggest that because I'm in a romantic relationship with Asch that I care for you any less! Or even fathom that means it's alright for you do go die as long as Asch lives!"

"I know," Luke replied, his voice quiet and meek. "But it's okay. No matter how you slice it up, a cousin hardly compares to a soul mate."

"Luke..." Natalia stood there a moment unsure how to respond. She couldn't... she couldn't look him in the eye and honestly deny him, and that was a fact that made her loathe herself. She hated how what Luke said was true, how a small part of her felt such intense relief at the thought that
Asch would live. "You're still my family... I still, I still care for you. I don't want to see you die!"

The princess took a step forward and wrapped her arms around her cousin, and cried. Luke gently returned the gesture, swaying on his feet, trying to calm her with the rhythmic motion.

"Please reconsider," Natalia pleaded. "You know you don't have to do this. There must be some other way; Jade will come up with something."

"We don't have time," Luke answered gently.

"No! There's still time. I know you find it difficult to find your place in the world, but this isn't it. If you reconsider, we can work on it together. We can help you figure out your future... you and me and Asch, we'll all put our heads together and... and..."

"Natalia... you know that's not an option anymore. It's too late. It's me or Asch, and you of all people can understand why we can't afford for it to be Asch."

"Don't... I don't want to lose you. Seven years ago I almost lost Asch; I didn't think I could ever feel any worse than I did then but... I don't want to lose you either."

Luke smiled and continued to rock her. This was why he had made the choice he had, to protect these people that he treasured more than anything. True that he was protecting the entire world, but if it were only these seven lives that would be spared he still wouldn't hesitate for a moment. His friends were everything to him.


"I wish there was another way."

"So do I," Luke confessed, no louder than a whisper as he held her closer. "So do I."

Natalia stepped away from Luke, her arm wiping tears from her eyes and she managed a smile for him. "Tear is in the library," she said. "She says she doesn't want to speak with you, but I think you really ought to go talk to her."

"In the library, the last place I'd hang out, huh?" Luke tried to grin but it only made him look sadder for the attempt.

"Yes, in the library," she confirmed before turning her back to him.

"Thanks, Natalia."

But whether Natalia heard him or not, Luke didn't know. She simply continued to walk at a steady pace, her shoulder trembling, until she had vanished around a corner.

The library was dark, no one else was up so late, and if Tear was still here, she hadn't bothered to light a lamp. Luke navigated his way between the bookcases thinking how perfectly content he would be should the darkness simply swallow him right here. He thought he'd felt dread when he'd seen Natalia coming, but that had been nothing compared to the chest crushing sensation that left him focusing in order to properly breathe. Luke began to wonder if this whole thing hadn't all been orchestrated; a master plan of Jade's to wear him down until he changed his mind. If this chain of encounters was solely the work of fate, it had a sense of humour to rival the Colonel's; a morbid thought indeed.
Luke slowed his pace a bit, beginning to enjoy the solitude the darkness offered, soaking in the night's calmness and though Daath's atmosphere was still one of sorrow and mourning, Luke found it comforting. He began to walk slower still, running his fingers along the many books that sat harmlessly on the shelves, letting the tactile sensation link him to reality. Slowly, he let his panic slip away to the steady patter of his hand against the books. He loved moments like this. Moments of serenity and calm, when the world seemed to hold its breath... moments that soon he'd no longer have to enjoy...

Luke grabbed his wrist to steady his trembling hand and silently cursed himself. Why was he so terrified? Was it the vast unknown that was death that made his heart race? Or was it the thought of losing absolutely everything? The things he held close to his heart, the things he didn't even realize he treasured... he would lose it all. Or maybe it was simply the knowledge of what he was doing to those who would be left behind.

Luke hadn't found the answer by the time he came across Tear. She sat on the window sill, the moon carving her face and casting an elegant shadow on the ground. It was times like these where her beauty really struck Luke. Tear wasn't an exceptionally pretty woman. She was modest, not the kind of girl who had every male with eyes pining for her attention, but not unattractive either. Still, she had moments, here and there, just like this one when she caught Luke's eye and she could take his breath away.

From the corner of her eyes, Tear caught a glimpse of motion. Of all times, she had told Natalia to leave her be. Luke's sudden declaration had hit her like a blow to the stomach and the melodist was still reeling from it all. How had it all come to this? How could this world take Luke from her? She just, she just couldn't wrap her mind around it. A world without his smile, without his laugh, without his silly but heartfelt attempts to make everyone happy... that kind of place didn't exist. Why couldn't he see that? Die to save the world? There was no world without him. For others maybe, but not for her.

Another shuffle drew her attention. Tear turned to tell the Princess off but was stopped short as the dark figure stepped from the shadows.

"Luke!" Tear uttered before reeling in her surprise. She exchanged the small spurt of joy that always accompanied his presence for a more bitter feeling. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to you." The redhead swallowed hard, and his hands firmly clasped his jacket to disguise his shaking.

"I don't have anything to say to you right now," Tear replied coldly.

"But I have something I want to tell you," Luke said. Tear returned her watchful gaze to the window without acknowledging his words.

"Remember back after Akzeriuth," Luke continued, swallowing hard. "I had decided that if there was anything I could do to protect you, to protect all of you, that I would do it without hesitating. I thought if I could die to protect you I would do it happily. I wondered if I'd died back then, if maybe I would have been able to save Akzeriuth. It seems kind of silly now, and I realize how stupid thinking like that was. I didn't understand anything; my death wouldn't have made a difference. My life wouldn't have meant anything if I had disappeared back then, and it would have been an insult to their sacrifice."

"How can you say such a thing? How can you hold your life in such disregard? By acting like your life is worthless, you're insulting everyone who cares about you!"
"I don't think my life is worthless!" Luke protested. "I... I think the exact opposite. I don't want to die, to be honest, I'm absolutely terrified. I'm standing here talking to you, but I can barely stop shaking long enough to say something. I value all the time I've spent with everyone."

_all the time I've spent with you._

"But then I keep thinking: I'm only one person. All these feelings, all these hopes, dreams, apprehensions, all of it; everyone else has them too. With my one life, I can protect that infinite number of feelings. For someone like me who doesn't have a future... it's more than I could ask for."

"Don't say those things!" Tear protested turning around and surprised by Luke's proximity to her face. "You thinking like that is exactly-"

Luke put a finger to her lips and shook his head. "No, it's the truth. I've tried, Score knows I've tried. I spent two months trying to fit into Asch and Natalia's world, trying to find my place in the mess of it all... but I'm not blind. I know I don't belong there. I wasn't meant to exist; I'm not saying I regret living or that I shouldn't have been born, just that there was never a place for me to begin with."

"I don't care, you can use explanations to justify what you're doing all you want, it doesn't make a difference."

"You wanted to get to know me," Luke stated in defeat. "Well here you go, this is who I am. Whether you accept it or not, is up to you."

"I'll never accept what you're doing..."

"Aren't you being a little unfair?"

"Just how am I being unfair to say I won't accept you running off and dying?"

"Because you made the exact same choice."

"I nev-" But before she'd even finished her protest it hit her.

"You were ready to die to safely lower the Outer Lands. You accepted the fact that you would become tainted with the miasma despite the consequences because saving the world was more important."

"It's not the same," she replied, but her voice had lost its edge.

"Because this time you're the one left behind to suffer?"

Tear had no reply.

"I know what I'm putting you through; I went through the same thing back then. But I also understand now how you felt. I can see why it was so important. I can't back down; we can't let Master Van win! So even though you'll probably hate me, I can't turn back. I can only hope that maybe, someday, you'll forgive me. Even if-" and Luke's voice broke. "Even if I won't be around to see it."

Tear would never forget those last words, those nine simple words that shattered every illusion of happiness she'd ever entertained. Luke was...Luke was going to die. She was really going to lose him. Part of her hadn't accepted it, dismissed the possibility as one of Luke's moments of stupidity,
a lapse in his far from infallible judgement. Hearing him say it, to voice that reality, brought with it a pain and grief that Tear had never known. Her light... her sun was gone and it would take what was worth living for with it.

"I- I'm sorry," Luke managed, unable to stand watching the light vanish from her eyes, her face struck with grief. He... Luke barely managed a bow and vanished back in the direction from which he'd come.

Tear barely noticed him leave.

Outside clouds covered the moon, leaving the melodist trembling and broken as she sunk into darkness.

Luke stood outside the library for a long time trying to pull himself back together. Part of him was afraid of what would ensue if Tear decided to leave the library's confines while he was still there leaning up against the wall. But by Yulia's graces she didn't cross his path and Luke was hurrying back towards their room. He wanted to be in bed where he could at least pretend he was sleeping and not have to face anyone until the morning when Noelle could take them to the Tower of Rem. Then... Then he wouldn't have to worry about anyone anymore.

Luke was grateful Ginji had to return to Sheridan to give the Albiore some maintenance. He didn't want one more person to face, and something about Noelle made her seem more understanding. Even if she didn't approve, she still seemed easier to deal with than her older brother. Dealing with people was something at which Luke was quickly finding out he wasn't as good at as he'd thought. He just wanted to go to bed and not have to think. But their room was a long ways away, and he'd a lot more room to run into someone else.

It was at the top of the steps that Luke found Guy, leaning against the wall and clearly waiting. He'd positioned himself in a spot where Luke couldn't get back to the room without passing by him. Once he'd crossed the bridge spanning the entry hall he could take an alternate route, but not before then.

Guy spotted him and wasted no time making his way towards the redhead. Luke knew that look in his eyes, he knew exactly what was coming his way; the only thing Luke had to decide, was whether to dodge it, or to let Guy's hit land.

Luke underestimated the impact of the blow and the sharp pain in his face was only added to by the pain that flew up his right flank as it absorbed the force of the fall. Pulling himself back to his feet, Luke almost expected a second hit, but it never came and Luke finally worked up the courage to look his best friend in the eye.

"What the hell?" Was the only thing Guy said.

"Normally I'd be the one asking you that, but I kind of deserved it."

"Kind of deserved it? That doesn't even begin to cover the sheer stupidity of what you've been thinking! You're just a child! The concept of death shouldn't even occur to you!"

"I wish the world was that kind of place..."

"Then make it that kind of place! Live and make a difference in this world, don't just throw everything away! You can't amount to a bloody thing if you're dead!"

"If I don't do anything, there won't be a world left! The miasma will destroy everything."
"God damn it, forget about the miasma! This is about you living or dying!"

"So what are you saying then?" Luke demanded. "That it's fine for me to live and Asch to go die?"

"No! It's not okay for either of you to die! I hate this self-sacrificial attitude you both have, acting like your lives are only yours to keep or throw away as you will. There's nothing to be gained from thinking that way, no one will end up happy if you walk down that path! I refuse to believe that this is the only option, there has to be some other way! A way for both of you to live!"

"But there isn't," Luke replied. "At least, not one that we'll find in time. People are dying Guy... Ion died, how many other people have lost friends or family to the miasma already? Wishing it away isn't going to eliminate the miasma. How many have to die before we realize there's no other choice?"

"Why you? Why does it have to be you?" Guy demanded.

"Because we're the only ones who can create a hyperresonance."

"I know that but why? Why does it have to be you...?" Guy's hands came to rest on Luke's shoulders as his whole frame sank in defeat. "You of all people deserve to live. After everything... after everything you've given up for this world, you should be the ones who get to live in it, who get to see the future you've worked so hard to build, damn it!"

"We've all sacrificed a lot; that's why we can't let everything fall apart now," Luke said. "I wish it didn't have to be me, I wish it didn't have to be anyone. Not me, not Mary, not any of the replicas... but it's not that simple."

"You've really decided, haven't you? No matter what any of us say, it's not going to make a difference, is it?"

Luke shook his head solemnly.

"I figured as much. You were never one to give in when there was something you wanted. Between you and Asch, you are the most stubborn people I have ever known. Even when you're doing something stupid, you'd never let anyone talk you out of it."

"I know you're right," he admitted. "I know that you have to do something; that we can't just let the miasma linger. The fact that you've realized it, and can think about it as calmly as you are, is just proof of how much you've grown up. Jade was right in what he said, it's not fair of me to criticize you when I don't have any alternatives to offer, but I don't want to see you die. You're my best friend... I don't want to lose you."

Luke took a deep breath, but even so he had to wait a moment, steadying his voice until he knew he could say something without having it fail him. "I don't want to lose you either... but... there's no other way. I can't let Asch do this... so this is the only choice I have."

"I know you can't. But don't act like your choice was taken. There is always a choice."
"No, there really isn't. Not for me."

"No, I guess there wouldn't be," Guy conceded. He knew that would be Luke's answer. The alternative of doing nothing wasn't even an option.

"Thank you Guy. Thank you for always being my friend."

"You don't have to thank me for that," Guy added. Luke only smiled weakly and waved, continuing on his way back to the room.

Guy punched the wall, unable to numb the feelings that seared through his system.

"Idiot."

Jade leaned against the rail that lined the pass over the cathedral's main entrance hall. From up here he could watch any proceedings down below, and it had become a favourite spot of his, especially back when Daath had served as a home to many of their opponents. There was no saying when someone might slip with a bit of important information. Now, there was no one but the usual guard down below and little information that might serve his purpose, but still he stood, watching the emptiness and pondering.

The Malkuth Colonel hated dead ends, for they never truly were dead ends; there was always another path, another choice if one looked at the issue with enough scrutiny. This issue, however, had brought even him to a startling halt. The lack of progress in the research on both countries front was the largest problem. Though they'd done well in analyzing the miasma's composition, there weren't even any theories on methods to neutralize the toxin. No documented compounds from any database would serve and even the most advanced medications did little to treat the poison's toxicity. Asch had been right in saying they had precious little time remaining; far too little time to develop a feasible alternative. But still he thought.

Jade sat in bed, scrutinizing the IV tube in his arm, but unable to find a logical reason to remove it. No irritation, no infection, a suitable vein... the nurse had placed it well. The sun trickled in the window from Baticul's skies but did little to alleviate the sense of confinement. There was little Jade despised more than being held against his will, save perhaps those who held him. Treatment was not unwarranted, but the state of quarantine the future monarch had him under was. Jade rubbed his temple, sitting back against his pillow. Only three hours until they would change his bandages, he had plenty of time to orchestrate a suitable escape.

To his surprise, not ten minutes later, the door opened, and a redhead stepped in, closing it behind him. Jade smirked.

"And just how did you get in here, Luke?" The Colonel inquired.

Luke returned the smirk. "You may be able to tell Asch and I apart, but the guards sure can't."

"Come to plead for your brother's life?"

"Nope, if you want to put him in his place, have at it. Heck, I'll help."

"So what brings you here?" Jade asked.

"I just wanted to see how you were making out," he replied. "You were hurt pretty bad back there, and before you try to deny it, I saw how hard Nebilim hit you. You're lucky you didn't die." Luke
paused for a moment. "It must have really hurt..."

"Yes well, brushes with death aside, my wounds are healing without any major complications. The pain was mostly superficial; I didn't particularly take note of it at the time."

"I didn't mean physically," Luke stipulated. "Facing Nebilim again like that... having to watch her die, even if it was just a replica. It must have really hurt."

"Not particularly."

"Just try not to give up on it, okay?"

"And what exactly are you referring to?"

"Hope."

"That hardly applies to our current discussion," Jade replied calmly.

"It's why you got hurt isn't it?" Luke continued, and he didn't miss the way Jade's lips twitched, indicating he wasn't as far from the mark as Jade would have him believe. "You hesitated, because you hoped that she wouldn't go berserk, that she might be different from the replica in your past."

"Hope is a fruitless gesture. Nothing has ever come of it."

"I don't know what may have happened to you in the past, but... try not to give up on hope. No matter how small it seems."

"You are certainly still a child," Jade said with a chuckle.


"I'm certain I'll manage, your brother doesn't allow for many other options with these circumstances." Luke chuckled and waved one last time before leaving again.

No matter how small... was it? Jade couldn't resist a smile as he adjusted his glasses. These children were so demanding...

Sentiments of that nature were such flickering notions, for they'd truly reached a dead end. No amount of thinking, of fate, or of hope would spare his charges, because while the Colonel hated to admit it, Asch didn't know how right he was. There was no time left, the time they'd been allowed for wishful thinking and delusions was past. No alternative could be implemented on such a large scale at this point without needing the time that it would take for half the world's population to die. It had become inevitable; one of them had to make the ultimate sacrifice. Jade sighed.

Perhaps it was fitting that hope die with Luke. Looking up from the level below, his ruby eyes met a set of green.

"Luke."

"Jade."

Without the moon to light it, the courtyard was dark as Luke wandered through it. He was worn, tired of fleeing his racing mind and shouldering the guilt that all his friend's emotions had laid
upon him. He just wanted to go to bed. He'd chosen the long way, walking outdoors letting the
night's crisp air help clear his mind. At least that's what he told himself; he knew the truth. He was
just avoiding Asch. With everyone so restless, he didn't doubt Asch was somewhere in the
cathedral and Luke didn't want to have to face him.

Luke was starting to realize why Asch had so readily pushed everyone away, why he had found it
easier to be cruel than to deal with the barrage of emotions he would have had to face. How simple
a thing it would have been to have them angry, not wanting to speak with him... he would be spared
their sorrow, their disappointment. All those crushing emotions that took the resolve right out from
under him, they would stay buried beneath petty anger at irrelevant things. But Luke knew that
wasn't right. He just hated how easily his resolve was shaken when he looked them all in the eyes.
When he was forced to acknowledge everything he was losing, it was almost more than he could
bear.

The truth of the matter was, even though it was Asch he was protecting, he was the one Luke
feared losing the most... and he had almost eight years of cherished memories to tell him why.
Eight years of laughter, of tears, of pointless fights and treasured moments that drew out everything
Luke loved about the world. But it was because of those memories, those moments that he had to
do this. Because while it scared him to think of giving all that up, trying to fill in the hole that Asch
would leave behind, was infinitely more terrifying. Asch couldn't be sacrificed; that one fact
remained constant.

And thus, so did Luke in his decision.

The redhead stopped on the path he walked, a figure stood up ahead blocking the road, just barely
visible in the darkness. Peaking from behind the clouds, the moon lit his face but Luke didn't need
it to know that it was Asch standing there. Deep down Luke had known he couldn't avoid his
brother if Asch really wanted to find him. Yet something about seeing his sibling standing there,
surrounded by an air of sheer defiance, helped boost his resolve. Luke met his stare with one of
equal fervency.

Luke remembered why he'd chosen this path.

"I'm not letting you go through with this," Asch stated simply, his voice cold. "You will not be the
one to die."

"I'm sorry, but I am. No matter what you say, it's not going to change anything," Luke answered.

"You're really serious."

"Yes."

"Fine," Asch spat. Luke stood in shock, he hadn't expected Asch to give in at all, much less so
quickly. His sibling never went down without kicking and screaming the entire way and Luke had
fully expected to have to deal with that. What was Asch thinking?

It only took one look in Asch's eyes for Luke to retract every word. That fire meant this was far
from over, and Asch had in no way just conceded defeat.

"Fine!" Asch repeated, his intensity increasing. He could feel even muscle in him trembling,
whether it was in anger or in fear, Asch didn't know any more, nor did he care. To say he wasn't
shaken by Luke's unwavering resolve, even knowing he had spoken to his friends, was a lie, but
this insanity was ending regardless. Here and now. Asch drew his sword and pointed it at Luke.
"Draw. Show me your resolve! Show me that you will see this through no matter what stands in your way!"

A look of surprise flew through Luke's features but he reined it in just as quickly his voice escaping with an exasperated tone. "Asch, I'm not going to fight you."

"Pathetic! The only way you're continuing down this road, is if you go through me!"

"I have no reason to fight you Asch! You're not proving anything!"

"If you are so insistent on doing this, even if it means destroying me in the process, then do it!"

"Alright then," Luke drew his sword, moonlight reflecting off a tip far steadier than his sibling's. He didn't want to fight, he didn't want to hurt Asch more than he already had... but for Asch, there was no other option. Asch had to do this; so it would be Luke's final act to indulge him.

It only took the first hit for Asch to realize how little attention he'd paid to Luke. Whether it was because of their fighting, or because he was afraid of all he might lose, it no longer mattered. All that mattered was where there had once been a helpless child, Asch now found an able and independent warrior, and he had no idea where he'd come from. Strike for strike they danced fluidly across the courtyard to the sound of clashing metal. He hadn't seen Luke... not at all.

Asch had expected to find Luke hesitant, to find his strike uncertain and his resolve wavering, but he saw none of these things. Instead he felt the same feeling that often shadowed him when he had sparred with Van; the feeling of facing someone stronger, whose skills surpassed your own. The feeling of inevitable defeat... No! Absolutely not! There was no way he would allow this to happen, to let this chain of events unravel, not while he could still fight! He wouldn't... no he couldn't lose!

Asch wasn't fighting for himself this time. He wasn't fighting as a game or as a way to teach Luke something, it wasn't because they were angry or even for that twisted sense of satisfaction that came with knowing he was better, that Luke still needed him for something. He was fighting to protect! To protect the one thing that made his life worth living these past eight years! To know that the light that had always given him reason to persevere, even when things seemed like they couldn't get worse, would carry on in this world! He was fighting so he wouldn't have to watch his only baby brother die in front of his eyes for a world that couldn't accept him in the first place.

Yet no matter how many of these feelings Asch put forth, he was always met by Luke. Every strike, every parry, it was effortless to his sibling and Luke flowed from each move to the next with a skill Asch had never noted. Luke was unwavering, and each time their eyes met, the confidence Asch saw there shook him to his very core. How long had he turned his eyes away, ignored this person he was willing to die to protect?

For so long Asch had feared replacement, that Luke would someday overshadow him, replace him as Van had once intended he do. Asch always had to be the better one, no matter what the task had been, he had to be stronger, faster, smarter... so that people would notice him. He couldn't light up a room like Luke did; he couldn't paint their faces with smiles or make them laugh when they were sad. He couldn't just talk to someone, or make a friend... so he had to be better, so people wouldn't forget about him too. Yet this, to have Luke replace him on his deathbed... Asch could never have dreamed, not even in his darkest nightmares.

Luke was undeniably strong, but Asch wasn't without any tricks either, and for each time Luke pushed him back, Asch returned the favour leaving them at a standstill. The endurance Asch had once counted upon no longer surpassed his brother's and while fatigue began to drain away at his extremities, he would never give up. He wouldn't stop until he saw Luke surrender, until he saw
the path before them made right again. Luke could not die; and for that Asch would do whatever he had to, no matter the consequence.

Matched blow for blow, flashes of moonlight danced of their blades as the moon darted between clouds. Luke could feel Asch's desperation, his coursing feeling relayed through his attacks as well as the connection that remained open between them. No thoughts or words passed, just raw unfiltered emotions, a storm upon a calm sea that fought to keep its surface steady. Luke couldn't afford to falter, because he knew what had to happen. He knew he couldn't let Asch win.

Nervous at first, Luke was pacified within the first few minutes of their battle, realizing he could match Asch; the gap that had once seemed impossibly large was nothing anymore. Perhaps it was his resolve, fate lending him the skill to see his future through, but he knew he wouldn't lose. So he let Asch continue, let all his pent up emotions drain through his attacks until all that remained was desperation, emptiness, and the fear that Luke himself had once felt so intensely when he'd thought Asch would die. He'd hidden it with anger at the inevitable decision about the replicas, Asch hid it behind this battle, but it was time to stop the lies.

Asch didn't even see what had happened, Luke vanished from sight and before he could comprehend what was going on, his sword flew from his hand, landing with a clatter on the stone path. Asch sunk to his knees, shock, defeat and despair all blending into a single existence that swallowed him as drops of rain began to stain the ground below.

"How..." Asch barely managed a whisper.

"I told you I'd get better than you if you didn't start showing up to practice," Luke said with a gentle smile, sheathing his blade and offering Asch a hand. Asch didn't notice the gesture, staring absent-mindedly into the dark and rainy night.

"Why are you doing this?" A pleading and unfamiliar voice escaped his sibling. Luke sank down to the ground to meet Asch's empty eyes.

"I won't let you die," Luke answered simply. "No matter what that means... for either of us."

"I'm just..." Asch's shoulders sank even further. Luke leaned forward and wrapped his arms around his brother, and he smiled when he felt Asch's chin rest on his shoulder. "I'm just so tired Luke..."

"It's just late," Luke answered, though they both knew that wasn't what was meant.

"No... I can't do this anymore Luke. Freeing Lorelei, stopping Van, Kimlasca, Mother... everything... I can't do it. No matter how much I accomplish, there's ten times more that I haven't done. I feel like I'm running in circles... I can't..."

Luke held Asch closer, hearing all the things that went unsaid. The constant weight on his shoulders, the burden of his endless responsibilities that crushed him, drained him, and stole what little happiness he could find in this dying world. No one should have to face the things he had, much less alone.

"I know you're tired," Luke whispered. "But I also know what a strong and wonderful person you are. I've always respected you, and always looked up to you. You're my big brother... you can do anything. I look at you, and I can see the amazing person that you will become. That's why... you absolutely cannot die. No matter what happens now, no matter what happens in the future; you can not die. The future can't afford to lose someone whose life will be as incredible as yours will be."

The sound of rain filled the courtyard, the cold drops soaking both boys to the bone. Their long red
hair clung to their faces streaming more water down into them as they stayed there on the ground. The cold only added to the numbness in his limbs, and in his heart so pierced by the words Luke had spoken. Why? What was the point of anything, of all the strength he'd acquired, if he couldn't protect this one person? This one soul that meant the world to him? He sworn... he'd sworn he'd protect Luke no matter what! Luke was his little brother! What good was he if he couldn't protect him?

"You're not alone, you know," Luke said, his voice dampened by the rain. "Not now, not ever. All those burdens, all those responsibilities... you don't have to carry them by yourself. You're never alone, and no matter what happens, I'll always be supporting you."

"Why?" Asch managed, his voice broken.

"Because I don't want you to die."

Asch felt his entire body freeze at those simple words. How? How had Luke known... all this time, through everything, that's all he'd ever really wanted to hear. From someone... from anyone, he just wanted to know that they wanted him to live, that they wanted him around. But no, they'd just gotten angry, blamed him for an impossible decision, for being thoughtless and careless and for making the only reasonable choice he could. Never once had they said...

Asch's arms came up and he held Luke back, in this, their last shared moment together.

No matter what happens, you cannot die.

The rain continued to fall onto the courtyard, long after only the crimson haired boy remained.

Luke closed the door to the room, relieved to find it empty. A trail of water followed behind him, his hair and coat still wet from the rain but Luke had little desire to dry himself off. He'd little desire to do anything. While he'd put up a strong front for Asch, there weren't words to describe how seeing his brother like that had destroyed him. He didn't want to do this! He didn't want to hurt everyone... he didn't... he didn't want to die. But what other choice was there? Why... why did things have to be this way?

A pillow was sent crashing into the wall before Luke sank to the floor, a small puddle of water pooling around him as tears of frustration spilled down his face. What... what was he supposed to do?

Turning his head, a small flash of light caught his eye. The fonstone that Ion had given him was sitting on the table next to his bed. Luke walked over and picked up the small green stone, watching it glisten as light reflected from within its depths. There was no mistaking it; Luke would know the small rock in his sleep. But what was it doing there? He was sure he'd put it away earlier.

Holding the small stone in his palm, the familiar warmth it offered gave Luke little comfort. What would Ion have done? What would he have wanted in all this? Luke didn't want to die! He couldn't bear the thought of never being with his friends, with Tear or Guy or Asch ever again. He would never watch Peony make fun of Jade, or be there when Mother woke up, or listen to Ginji, Noelle and Aston argue about the Albiores... none of it. But... he didn't see any other options! There wasn't any other choice... unless... Luke stared at the fonstone.

Maybe Ion had given him the answer all along.

Luke closed his eyes, feeling the flow of Seventh Fonons in the room. They were agitated, probably in response to him, maybe even to his and Asch's fight. Luke took another deep breath
and tried to settle his feelings. He wasn't going to get anywhere all worked up like he was. Instead of the overbearing guilt, Luke instead focused on the last time he'd tried reading the Score. It was so long ago, back before they'd even dealt with Mohs. Wait Mohs...

Mohs had read the Score that day... and the flow of fonons had been so obvious and so unusually clear; a pattern hidden when someone experienced did the same. But Luke's memories of that time were foggy, marred by blankets of darkness, fading in and out of consciousness. He remembered the wind, the cold... it was raining, just as it was now, as it had been when he faced Asch. Asch had been next to him then too, then there was pain, a mind splitting pain as the fonons flowed through the stone and then...

Luke nearly doubled over as fire flew through his head, the most intense pain he'd ever experienced. He instinctively moved to clasp his head but found his arms impossible to move. His spiralling world went black and Luke fell into darkness.

How long he fell, Luke didn't know, but when he opened his eyes, he was floating in a sea of black like the nightmares he'd once feared, but this was different. Around him scenes flashed by, like fleeting memories of events to come. First he saw the war, Kimalscan and Malkuth troops exploded in waves of blue and red, blood spilling as man after man fell. The Kimlascan troops advanced, Malkuth was forced back. Blood was everywhere; Engeve was slaughtered, St. Binah fell behind it. None were left alive.

What is this? But he knew. Deep within him the words resonated from hidden memories.

*ND2019, The forces of Kimlasca-Lanvaldear shall march northward, through the Rugnica Plains. After inflicting atrocities upon the villages in their wake, the army shall surround the fortress capital.*

Then he saw Akzeriuth, or what he thought was Akzeriuth by the bodies lining the miasma infested streets. There were no children screaming, women crying over their lost husbands... only death; a sea of corpses. Then Luke saw the palace, and he realized it wasn't Akzeriuth at all, it was Grand Chokmah. Blood painted the throne. Peony lay motionless at its feet.

No... no this wasn't possible, it wasn't happening!

*The Kimlascan army will stain the Malkuth throne with the blood of its last emperor. Their howls of victory shall resound throughout the land. ND2020, A mountain of corpses shall bury the fortress capital.*

Was this supposed to be the future? Impossible, Asch would never let this happen! Kimlasca would never be allowed to do such a thing as long as he was alive! Was that it? Was this supposed to be what would happen if he died?

Grand Chokmah faded, but reappeared as Engeve, the same portrait as mountains of bodies lined the streets. Luke tried to look away but only saw St. Binah, then Kaitzur, and Chessedonia. It was the same everywhere... they were all dead. Luke wanted to be sick, he couldn't stand this anymore... No more... please no more!

The final scene was of Baticul. It wasn't the city he had known, in fact, had he not been staring at his home, he wouldn't have believed it. The once proud structures had rusted, buildings fell apart, wood rotted in this ghost town. There were no bodies, only dust that blew in an empty wind.

*Thus shall Auldrant be destroyed by the miasma and turned to dust. This is the end of Auldrant.*
Luke knew what he was seeing... it was the Score. The future as the Score had seen it.

At that realization, the scenes before him all vanished, and Luke returned to a world of nothing but darkness.

"The light of the sacred flame shall approach the Kimlascan city of fon machines, seeking a way to purify the taint."

The familiar voice made Luke's heart ache and he turned to see Ion standing behind him. He was exactly as Luke remembered, save for his once gentle eyes that were now ablaze in a burning gold.

"There, salvation shall be found through the use of a forbidden power." Ion finished.

Though he wore the face of his old friend, every fibre in Luke's body flared and he began to shake. "Who the hell are you?" He demanded, his voice trembling in rage.

Ion tilted his head curiously, an act that was quite unlike the Fon Master that Luke had known, but smiled apologetically. Luke's throat tightened and he fought back the storm of emotions brewing below the surface.

"I'm sorry," Ion apologized. "I thought this was a form you'd find familiar, I meant no offense."

In the blink of an eye, Ion had vanished and in his place stood a boy Luke's height. He had identical red hair that fell the same length down his back. Had this person existed beyond the confines of Luke's mind, he knew that he'd be mistaken for Asch and Luke's triplet, but to Luke, he looked as different from himself or Asch as his sibling was from his own reflection. Luke just knew. It wasn't Asch, nor was it a mirror image of himself. It was someone else entirely.

"Lorelei."

Lorelei smiled.

"Is this what happens when people read the Score?" Luke asked, deciding against questioning the being's presence in his mind. It was like questioning why he and Asch had a connection. There was probably some long and complicated answer, but it really didn't matter. It was just something he'd accepted as a fact. "They see what's going to happen?"

"No, you can see the planet's memory as I can because you are special. You are a part of me."

"Because I'm your isofon?"

"That's right. This was the future I gave to Yulia, the eventual outcome of her plan to raise the Outer Lands and create the Sephiroth. This was the future that she chose."

"Can it really be changed? I mean, is there another way to get rid of the miasma? A way where no one has to die?"

Lorelei sighed sadly. "I was asked that same question many years ago; but the answer I gave Yulia remains. I do not know. I only have the power to see one future, one outcome as it exists in the Planet's Memory. But if it's you, I believe you can change it. I do believe you can carve your own future."

Luke pondered what Lorelei had said for a moment. "Where have you been all this time? I thought you said you'd contact us."
"You try fighting your way out of confinement and try asking me again," Lorelei snidely remarked.

"You're trapped?" Lorelei gave him a pointed look. "Master Van!" Luke suddenly realized, berating himself for having forgotten such an obvious fact. "But if Master Van is trapping you, how are you here?"

"Just because he's trapped me, doesn't mean I have to go down without a fight," he said with a smirk.


Lorelei's smirk faded to a genuine smile. "Is that so?"

Luke's laughter abated and he was surprised to find himself able to laugh. In fact, all the weight that had pressed down on him earlier had all but vanished in place of a peaceful warmth that seeped through his mind; undoubtedly thanks to Lorelei. He smiled at the thought of the sentient essence of the Seventh Fonon worried about making him feel better. Thinking of it that way... was very comforting; a support when he thought he'd had none.

Yet, for all that Lorelei smirked and joked with him, there was no mistaking the difference from how he'd seemed before. He seemed weary, as if tired from fighting a long battle that he knew he couldn't win. But much like Asch, or maybe even himself, that wouldn't stop Lorelei from trying. What would happen if he lost before they managed to free him though?

"Lorelei..."

Lorelei smiled again, this time looking ancient and sad, and placed a hand on Luke's shoulder. "You're running out of time, I know you know that, but have faith in yourself and in your decisions. And try not to worry too much about me. I can still hold my own." He said it with conviction, but a wave of weariness belied his statement.

"I don't know..." Luke said. "I don't know if I can do this. It's all so much..."

"To do nothing is also a choice," Lorelei said. "I've done all I can for you. I don't have the strength left to fight the One who would seize glory. This is the last time I can help you."

"But there has to be something I can do!"

"Please free me. I just... want to be free. To know no boundaries, no confines... true freedom..." Lorelei started off into the darkness, as if watching a distant dream only he was privy to. Luke would never forget how he looked in that moment, sad, longing and betrayed, and Luke began to wonder why Lorelei was the only of the fonons trapped in the core.

Lorelei's image flickered, vanishing for a moment but reappearing translucent like a ghost. "Wait! Lorelei!" Luke called. "What about the Jewel! We can't find the Jewel! Where is it?"

"I sent it to you, beyond that I do not know."

"Please wait! What does that mean? I don't have it, so it must be somewhere!"

But Lorelei only smiled one last time, an aching reflection of Asch as he said, "Don't doubt yourself so fiercely. You're stronger than you know."

"Come back!"
But Lorelei was gone, leaving Luke to tumble endlessly into the darkness.
How long he sat out in the rain, Asch didn't know. He just sat there; letting the rain soak him, chill him to his very core until the numbness consumed his mind, and he no longer had to think. His crimson hair clung to the back of his neck and his jacket weighed heavily on his shoulders, but its weight was nothing like the weight on his chest.

He'd failed.

He'd sworn he would always protect Luke and he'd failed. All these years, all this time, he'd found meaning in that one simple goal. To have that one other person that would never confuse or replace him. To have someone who needed him and only him. Luke had grown so much lately, their battle had been a harsh reminder of that. He wasn't the helpless little replica he had once been; he'd become completely independent and self-sufficient. Luke didn't need him... not anymore.

No, that wasn't true! There were still some things Luke turned to him for... things his little brother would come to talk to him about... Asch had to believe that. When everything had been ripped away those eight years ago and he had nothing else, it was on Luke's existence that he'd rebuilt his shattered identity. If nothing else in his life stayed constant, he could manage, because he knew he had his little brother. Now...

No, he wasn't going to give up yet. There had to be something he could do. As long as Luke was still here, as long as he hadn't disappeared there was still hope. There was still time to fight! Asch didn't care what it took, what he would have to do, he would find another path. He'd die before he watched Luke disappear in front of his eyes... and he meant those words with all their implications.

Gathering his sword from the ground where it had lain since Luke defeated him, Asch slipped inside, trailing a small stream behind him. The water that hadn't registered to him before now sent a chill down his spine as it ran off his hair. His once numb limbs began to prickle and his head throbbed in protest. He grumbled, but gave the sensations no more consideration than that. He had far more important concerns.

Asch took a step forward but a wave of weakness buckled his knee and the throbbing in his head increased exponentially. What? What was going on? The pain of hitting the floor was completely overshadowed by the searing headache that had consumed him. Lorelei...? No, not quite. It was more familiar than that. It couldn't be...

*The light of the sacred flame shall approach the Kimlascan city of fon machines, seeking a way to purify the taint. There, salvation shall be found through the use of a forbidden power.*

Luke?

There was no mistaking his sibling's voice that had just resonated throughout his mind. Yet it was clear the words weren't his. What was it then? 'The light of the sacred flame'? Asch winced, the pain making it hard to think clearly. That sounded like the Score. But Luke couldn't have possibly... even if he could, why would he?

'Luke!' Asch tried; amazed at the amount of concentration something so simple suddenly took. He didn't get an answer. Asch tried again but, not surprisingly, he didn't have any more success, not that he had expected to. He knew this feeling, he'd only felt it once but he would never forget it. Between him and Luke was a massive golden wall, impassable as it had once been, but not as solid as he remembered. If he could have concentrated through the agony, he might have been able to
break though, but that was impossible right now. Still, it left him with the culprit.

Lorelei.

The hows and whys of what Lorelei was doing here and now of all times flew through Asch's mind as he raced back to their room, ignoring the wave of needles that jabbed into his legs with each step; his muscles protesting the sudden return of blood flow. The pain was welcome, it detracted from the throbbing in his head, and soon both sensations began to fade. By the time he'd rounded the final corner, both had vanished entirely.

Throwing the door open, Asch was surprised at the lack of golden glow, the missing ambiance. Where was he? Asch knew he was in the right place, and if Lorelei was possessing Luke again, then he must of had some purpose for doing so. Why would he just take off before speaking to anyone? The lack of his presence was confirmed by the newly re-opened connection to Luke but all manner of prodding still failed to produce any sort of response.

"Luke?" Asch asked aloud, wondering if he was hidden away in the shadows but there was no reply. The room looked completely undisturbed, save one bed whose pillow had been removed and now sat tussled in the corner.

"Luke!" Asch turned the corner to find his brother unconscious on the floor beside the bed. A quick look put most of his fears to rest; Luke was breathing regularly and didn't seem to be hurt anywhere, just unconscious. What in all of Auldrant had happened here? Gently shaking his brother's shoulder didn't produce any response; Luke was out cold.

Picking Luke up, Asch heard something fall to the ground with a hard thunk. What the-? Setting his sibling down on his bed, the young monarch searched the floor until he'd located the source, a small green fonstone. Luke had this? Well that made his initial guess a hell of a lot more plausible, but it was still hard to really grasp. Luke had read the Score? But how? Asch didn't remember hearing anything about anyone teaching him how. Sure, he'd spent more effort ignoring than listening to the others lately, but he still doubted something so odd would have escaped his notice. The question that was better yet though, was where had Luke gotten the fonstone in the first place?

"I'm telling you Jade, there has to be-" Guy's voice entered the room, the opening door pulling Asch from his thoughts. The Colonel wasn't far behind the former attendant and they seemed engaged in conversation. The topic wasn't hard to guess. The blond looked up and fell silent when he saw Asch. His eyes traced from the older to the younger sibling and he sighed. "Asleep already?"

"No, he's unconscious," Asch replied.


"I don't know, I just got here and found him on the floor."

"You do realize you're both soaked to the bone, when there is no need to go out in the rain to get here I might add," Jade pointed out. "You can't really expect us to believe you've no idea what happened?" Jade eyed him sceptically. What was with that look? What did they think he did? Asch scowled. Okay maybe their suspicions weren't that far off of what he'd planned, but still!

"Jade's right," Guy stated accusingly. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. Yes we ran into each other outside and we didn't exactly see eye to eye but he came back ahead of me. I just got here; I came because I knew something was wrong."
"I thought I'd taught you better than that," Jade commented, adjusting his glasses. Asch let out an exasperated sigh; it was obvious they thought he was lying.

"He had this in his hand when I found him," Asch held up the fonstone. He could tell from the look in Jade's eye that he'd won the Colonel over as soon as the man saw it.

"Is that?" Guy began to ask.

"A fonstone," Asch finished. "I can't figure out where he got it though."

"Well this is Daath," Guy added.

"All the more reason pieces of the Score shouldn't be lying around for him to pick up," Asch retorted.

"So you suspect Luke attempted to read the Score on this fonstone?" Jade inquired, still scrupulously analyzing the stone he'd since taken from Asch.

"I know he did. I don't know how he knew how... but I know he did, I heard it."

"What did it say?" The blond inquired.

"The light of the sacred flame shall approach the Kimlascan city of fon machines, seeking a way to purify the taint. There, salvation shall be found through the use of a forbidden power," Asch repeated. "I'm wondering if 'the taint' that it talks about isn't the miasma... maybe there's a solution to the miasma to be found in the city of fon machines."

"But if it's talking about things as they are now, then that would have to be the Planet Score," Guy pointed out. "I mean the Sixth Fonstone Score ends right after the war, right?"

"It would explain why he's unconscious," Jade stipulated. "Even with no training, simply reading a regular Score wouldn't have the ability to knock him unconscious. Luke has enough training in terms of handling fonons to be certain of that. Rather I'm more sceptical of the feasibility of this Score. There are several inconsistencies."

"Like what?" Guy asked.

"First off, according to the Score, 'the light of the sacred flame' perished in Akzeriuth. It makes it seem unlikely that this event Luke has read occurs after Akzeriuth."

"No, that's wrong," Asch intervened.

"What do you mean?" Guy asked.

"The Score said I would 'destroy myself and the city'. You don't have to die to destroy yourself. I mean in a way it came true, we all know what Luke was like after Akzeriuth."

"He destroyed himself..." Guy mulled. "I still don't get it; it was supposed to be Asch all along wasn't it?"

"It's like Van said," Asch continued. "The leaves may change but the essence of the Score doesn't. As he put it, 'a deviation like Luke's existence is nothing before Yulia's Score'. Even though the details vary a bit, it may still be relevant information."

Jade adjusted his glasses, interested at the translation Asch had put forth. It was a valid interpretation that he recalled considering but had pushed to the back of his mind as it'd little
relevance at the time. Though shadowed by the recent problems with the miasma, the issue of the Score remained unsolved, and Jade was beginning to think that perhaps they'd not made as much progress as they'd been led to believe.

"Regardless," the Colonel continued, leaving that as food for thought for a later time. "The 'forbidden power' it speaks of sounds a good deal like your hyperresonance," Jade added, directing his comments at Asch and the undeniable light of hope in his eyes. "The solution it offers may not be an alternative, but rather a confirmation of the plan already in place."

"I don't care," Asch shook his head. "Let's head for Belkend in the morning. There's still a chance that something may be there."

Asch heard Jade's arguments and they were completely sound and reasonable, but there was one factor the Malkuth Colonel wasn't considering... and that was Lorelei. Lorelei had undoubtedly been here and if he hadn't stuck around to talk to someone, then he must have wanted to talk to Luke. Lorelei had contacted Luke for a reason and Asch fervently hoped that the being had offered his sibling some sort of solution, because no matter what else he may think of the being, he knew Lorelei couldn't afford to lose them.

"Weren't you the one who kept saying we had no time to waste?" Jade inquired.

"If there's a chance," Asch answered with unwavering strength. "If there is even one small hope that we can get through this without anyone having to die, then I don't care what we have to do! We owe it to Luke to at least try! To at least try to save him!"

"You're right," Guy agreed. Jade only sighed.

No matter how small.

"To Belkend it is then."

Luke had woken the next morning and tried to play dumb for about ten minutes until Asch showed him the fonstone. Asch had purposely planned ahead; filling everyone else in on what had happened the night before, with the exception of the bit about Lorelei, and with six against one there was no way Luke could keep it under wraps. He'd finally confessed, admitting to using their prior encounter with Mohs and the former Grand Maestro's rather erratic attempts as a template to figure out how to read the Score. To Asch's dismay Luke still wouldn't say where the fonstone had come from, but the more they prodded him about it, the more Asch had a sneaking suspicion it was a gift from the late Fon Master. It was the only topic about which Luke was so adamantly silent.

Tear had confirmed the Score Asch had heard and that the fonstone was part of the Planet Score, another reason why the redhead was convinced it must have come from Ion; not just anyone had access to that. In fact a very few select individuals even knew it could be read from Daath, something Asch had discovered by chance when he'd investigated Mt. Zaleho in search of the Jewel of Lorelei. Asch was sure there was something here in Belkend that could save Luke, regardless of what else had to be done. Luke was not leaving this city to go die, not while Asch was still breathing.

The city of fon machines was unusually busy, much more so than Asch remembered it being, and while it didn't even begin to compare to what Daath had been, for the small research centre, it was quite startling. The unusual bustle made conversation difficult, but Asch didn't mind, it was probably for the better anyways. Not that he didn't want to talk, far from it; he had more than a few questions for his sibling who was contently walking beside him and the fewer interruptions the
‘Say Luke?’

‘What’s up?’ Luke asked curiously. He was surprisingly… normal, so much so that Asch was mildly bothered. Their fight, all the encounters with the others, it was like that whole night had never happened. Anise suggested that maybe he hit his head when he went unconscious and didn't remember the details; plausible, but Luke's silence said otherwise. He was hiding something, keeping it buried within his depths.

‘What happened that night?’

‘I told you already, I tried to read the Score and I got a really bad headache and passed out,’ the younger sibling explained. ‘I don't even really remember the Score I read that well…’

‘So Lorelei had nothing to do with it?’

Luke's eyes widened, Asch's grew darker. ‘How did you-?’

‘Do you really not trust me anymore?’ Asch asked. ‘Is that why you never tell me the truth, why you don’t talk to me unless I badger you about it? Why you keep everything to yourself?’

‘No, it's not like that at all!’

‘Then tell me!’ Asch snapped. ‘Tell me why you're always lying to me!’

‘I'm not lying! I'm just…’

‘Just not telling the whole truth. It's the same damn thing!’

‘I'm sorry…’ Luke sounded so meek and pitiful that Asch's anger fizzled out in an instant. ‘I guess…’ he began hesitantly, ‘I just guess that with all the fighting we've done lately, I've gotten used to not talking to you about stuff.’ Asch felt his words like a punch to the gut.

‘Yeah, you're right,’ Luke continued, either missing or ignoring the shock, immersed in a sudden wave of regret that crashed over his sibling. ‘I saw Lorelei; I think he came because I was reading the Score.’

‘Well it is the Score Lorelei personally gave to Yulia,’ Asch said, ignoring the feelings that had surfaced. They were no more than what he deserved for how he'd acted. The consequences of his choices, choices he'd willingly made, knowing this was how things would end up between them. But a part of him, deep down, didn't want to believe it would actually happen; didn't think it was possible to create such a painfully large distance between the two who had once been so close. ‘I don't think he came because you were reading the Score though, it's more like reading the Score is what let him find you.’

‘I think you might be right...’ Luke trailed off.

‘What happened, and please don't play the "I don't remember" card, it's not going to work with me. If we're going to figure this all out, then we need to know all the details.'


‘Saw what?’

‘I saw the Score, okay?’ Luke snapped. ‘I stood there and watched Kimlasca slaughter Malkuth, I
watched them massacre St. Binah and Engeve before murdering Peony! I watched the miasma spread until Baticul was nothing but rust and ruins! I saw the end of the world, Asch!'

As Luke spoke, flashes of images, memories passed through Asch's mind and the small glimpse revolted him. He caught a whisper of the emotions Luke had felt, and it made Asch feel sorry for asking, for digging up what Luke had tried to bury away. He didn't realize Luke wasn't talking about because it was painful, he had just immediately assumed it was because Luke didn't trust him. Asch almost shook his head at himself. How selfish he'd become...

'I'm sorry, I didn't think.'

Luke just shook his head. Part of him was angry at Asch for just not letting things be, but he also knew it wasn't any good to let them just sit there and fester. Asch was just trying to help...

'That's when Lorelei showed up,' Luke explained. 'He told me the Score that was on that fonstone. He tried to hide it... but he was tired and really worn out, I don't know how much longer he can stand up to Master Van. Asch you've really got to hurry and free him!' Asch bit his lip as Luke referred to a future in which only Asch existed.

'Did he say how, or where to find him?'

'No, he just...'

'He just what, Luke?'

'I asked him about the Jewel. He said he sent it to me and beyond that he couldn't tell where it was. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for screwing up, for not getting the Jewel! Now because of me he's suffering, and Master Van is using him to do all these terrible things. If I'd gotten the Jewel we could have freed Lorelei a long time ago, the core wouldn't be shaking, and the miasma wouldn't be here... that's why... that's why I have to do this. I have to clean up my own mess... at least, as much as I'm able.'

'Luke, how many times am I going to have to tell you? It's not your fault. Lorelei sent us the keys in a hurry, Van was trying to capture him; it could have as easily been his mistake as it was yours. Stop blaming yourself for it!'

Luke turned to him and smiled weakly; Asch realized at that point it didn't matter what he said, Luke was resolved to take whatever guilt he'd self-imposed with him to the grave. That thought alone made Asch sick. Luke was barely eight years old, he shouldn't have to think like that! He shouldn't even be able to think like that. But this world was not so kind a place, to Luke or to any of the people that lived within it.

"Do you guys have any idea where we're even going?" Anise asked, unintentionally butting into their conversation. "Belkend is a pretty big place; that Score didn't happen to be more specific did it?"

"No, it only said 'the city of fon machines'," Asch replied. "But if there's anything here, the labs would have at least heard of it."

"If you're heading to the labs, why not try asking Spinoza?" Noelle suggested.

"Dr. Spinoza is here?" Asch inquired.

"Yeah, he just moved back here recently. Belkend is much better equipped than Sheridan for researching and he's been trying to find a solution to the miasma almost non-stop."
"That's as good a place to start as any," Tear pointed out.

"Yeah," Anise agreed. "And we know where to find him. Beats wandering any day!"

"I was not lost," Asch grumbled.

"Were so," Anise shot under her breath.

"Do you think that he's back in his old lab?" Guy asked.

"Hard to say," Noelle pondered. "I know Class I was talking to him about working together on some future projects so he may have moved into their lab. I didn't really hear the details."

"Well we should at least start by checking his old lab," Tear stated. "We can worry about where to find him if he isn't there."


"Not really," the redhead shrugged. "I just don't have anything to add, that's all."

"If you say so," the blond replied with a raised eyebrow. He didn't buy it; neither did anyone else as they wandered through the labs. No one had missed the sudden change in his demeanour since his decision in Daath. It wasn't like he was withdrawing or ignoring them; he was just quiet, staying on the sidelines and seldom offered his input. Detached... that was the right word. Luke had detached himself, like his influence and existence was no longer relevant. He acted like he was already gone.

Tear stole a glance at her companion, but was quick to look away when he noticed her attention. She had barely said a word to him since leaving Daath. It wasn't that she was angry with him; she just didn't know what to say. All the trivial conversations she'd once loved having with him, now seemed so irrelevant. What did one say to someone they were about to lose? How did one say goodbye to someone as special as Luke was? The thought of it alone dragged her back to the dark and hollow feeling that had consumed her after their encounter in the library. Every word they'd spoken that night replayed over and over in her mind until she couldn't bear it anymore.

You made the exact same choice.

Why? Why couldn't she get his words, his face out of her head? Why did it feel like someone had torn her chest open, ripped out her heart and set whatever shards might have remained on fire? Why did the thought of losing Luke make her want to die too? It wasn't the same... and maybe Luke was right, maybe it was because the tables were turned, but it still wasn't the same. When she had been told she was going to die, she remembered being scared, she remembered hurting, but it was nothing compared to this. To die and be at rest seemed like a reward compared to having to deal with losing everything she loved.

Was that what this was? Tear almost froze on the spot, her temporary halt nearly had Anise colliding into her, but the protest of the younger girl went completely unheard. Was that what everything was about... did she... love Luke? His smile, his laugh, the way he always tried his hardest, always knew what to say to lessen the weight on her heart? His face, his voice, his ridiculously naive but bright view of life, the way he could light up her world just by walking into it? Everything about him made her smile, even his frustrating stubbornness, his annoying sense of pride... she treasured all of it. He wasn't like all the others; they were all friends but Luke was...

What did it matter anyway? What was the point? What was the point of realizing this when she was about to lose him? A world without Luke... a world without his smile, his light, it was more awful than she could bear.
"Tear, are you okay?" The melodist snapped out of her daze to see Guy staring at her, his head cocked to one side.

"I- I'm fine..." She barely protested.

"If you say so," he said with a shrug. "Careful not to fall behind, we don't want to lose you and let's face it, you'll never hear the end of it from Anise if you do."

"Don't worry, I won't..." Tear trailed off; already returning to whatever world Guy had startled her out of. The blond rolled his eyes but let her return to those thoughts as she followed behind him. Luke wasn't the only one who had been quiet lately, and it worried him. Tear wasn't like the other girls. Sure Natalia and Anise could put on an amazing front, but when they were hurting it was usually obvious, and that front would eventually crumble. Tear never faltered. She never cried, she never snapped, she didn't get pointlessly angry at irrelevant details... everything stayed bottled inside and if it didn't get out, Guy didn't doubt it would destroy her someday.

The lab's activity seemed promising; Guy wondered if the seemingly frantic atmosphere was really a sign for hope or not. He didn't look forward to dealing with Asch if this venture didn't turn out how he was hoping it would. Guy didn't really want to think of the consequences of it either, but he wasn't as hopeful as his former charge. The chances that something world changing had come up in the week since they'd been in Baticul and had heard from Ingobert were incredibly slim. Guy wasn't going to give up the hope, but he didn't dare expect more than that.

Spinoza's lab looked significantly tidier then the last time they'd been here and the researcher had been on the run. All the books that had been scattered on the floor were returned to their shelves, the papers were properly filed away and all the equipment seemed in order. Several different fon machines were running, processing a variety of calculations that only Jade stood a chance of understanding. The other thing the blond noticed was a giant map, graded in various shades of purple indicating the density of the miasma around the world. The darkness of the colours in some areas was alarming.

"Dr. Spinoza!" Asch called out when they'd spotted the researcher, tucked away in front of a monitor as neatly as one of his books.

"Asch, everyone, what are you all doing here?"

"The miasma," Asch provided.

"Ah, I see."

"That doesn't sound so good," Anise said bluntly.

"I wish I could say otherwise," Spinoza answered with a sigh. "But your little friend is exactly right, things are not looking hopeful. There aren't even any feasible theories; much less anything we could consider implementing to counter the effects of the miasma. Time is running thin for us all."

"We've got a theory," Luke spoke up, his voice sounding almost foreign.

"You do?" Spinoza asked, his curiosity peaked.

With a pleading look in Jade's direction, the Colonel began to give Spinoza a technical rundown of their plan. Asch bit his lip, wanting nothing more than to smite the researcher for the light in his eyes that grew with every word out of Jade's mouth. There had to be another way, there just had to be!
"That's brilliant," Spinoza mused once Jade had finished. "A hyperresonance breaks down all matter into the fonons that compose it." The researcher hit several keys on his fon machine and the screen pulled up a picture full of complex symbols. The symbols shifted, changing into three separate groups of slightly different symbols. Anise scowled, it just looked like someone's messed up idea of connect the dots, except instead of dots there were letters.

"And for those of us who haven't devoted our lives to research?" Natalia asked.

"Essentially the miasma will turn into different components that are naturally present in the air. It will be completely neutralized and reduced to several harmless compounds," Jade explained.

"Precisely!" Spinoza continued with renewed fervour. "And not only would it be highly effective, but the time it would take to orchestrate is incredibly short. It's the best alternative I've seen since this mess began." The researcher continued to pound away at the keys, even more complex calculations appearing on the screen.

"However..." he said, his face beginning to darken. "A hyperresonance on the scale you're talking, the toll it would take on you would be... well, fatal."

"But it will work, right?" Luke inquired.

"Surely you don't-" Spinoza was cut off when he saw the look in Luke's eyes. He'd known that feeling once, that resignation, that acceptance of one's fate. "Yes," he finally replied in a flat voice. "It would work."

"Thank you," Luke said. Asch shot Spinoza the scariest look the researcher had ever seen.

"I'm sorry..." Spinoza continued. "I wish I didn't have to tell you that, but it truly is the most likely solution at the moment, and I would wager it very well could be our only solution, if I'll be forgiven for saying so."

"No, it's okay," Luke said gently. "We already knew it was probably the only solution, we just wanted to hope."

"No it's not okay!" Asch burst out. "It's not-"

"Come on guys," Luke cut Asch off. "Let's go. We have to get to the Tower of Rem before it's too late."

"Damn it!" Asch cursed as everyone left the room, leaving him alone with the researcher.

"I really am sorry," Spinoza said. "I can't imagine how difficult this must be. I wish this could be done without so great a sacrifice."

"You really mean that?" Asch asked.

"I do."

"Good. Then I have a favour to ask of you."

"What was the hold up?" Anise asked, full of exasperation by the time Asch finally came out of the lab. It was putting it lightly to say everyone was on edge. It was finally time; they were finally going to the Tower of Rem...and they were going to lose one of their friends. There weren't words for how that felt. The shock of Ion dying was one thing, but this interminable build up, knowing
that it was coming just made every living moment agonizing.

"Sorry, but there's one last thing I want to do while we're here," Asch said, not looking any of them in the eye.

"And what's that?" Guy asked sceptically. It was one thing to have hope, but couldn't Asch see that there wasn't an answer to be found here? His delaying the inevitable was only making this harder on both of them.

"This way," Asch said solemnly. He walked through a door to the north and at first none followed. They watched him, hoping he'd notice and turn back. None of them wanted this to happen either but...

Luke was the first to follow Asch and Guy shook his head. He should have known Luke would concede. Not likely for himself, but because Luke felt guilty for what he was doing, for putting them all through this and he was far too willing to indulge his sibling's irrationalities. He would do whatever he could to make this easier, because Luke knew he was being selfish.

Asch led them back to an old wing of the research lab, one with few researchers about. Many of the labs were run down and no longer had functioning facilities. It seemed to be more of a storage area than anything else. Finally he stopped in front of a small door, tucked away in a corner that seemed like no one had frequented in ages. Guy scowled as his surroundings. What the hell did Asch want in a place like this?

"Luke," Asch said, his voice much quieter than usual as he opened the door. "I need to talk to you alone."

"And you had to come all the way back here for that?" Anise demanded.

"I need to talk to you where no one is going to interrupt us," Asch added with a bit more force to silence the former Fon Master Guardian.

"Alright," Luke agreed and followed his brother inside. Luke looked around, the lights flickering for a moment before turning on completely. It was an old lab, even more run down than the others that they'd passed on the way here. No one had used this lab for well over a year or two, and stray fon machine parts still littered the floor. The thud of Asch closing the door behind them drew his attention back to his sibling.

"Spinoza says this room is pretty well insulated, they shouldn't be able to hear us in here."

"What's this about?" Luke asked. Something was up, if Asch just wanted to talk in secret, they had their connection. Why the elaborate set up?

"Enough is enough," Asch said. "I want you to stop this."

"Asch, you know we don't have a choice anymore. I've seen what the world will become if the miasma lingers and I won't let that happen. Letting everyone die is not an option, and neither is losing you!"

"This whole plan was mine, my idea, my decision. I'm not letting you take responsibility for the
"I made a choice too, just like you did. I made a choice to follow this path knowing the consequences. It's my responsibility too. Remember you told me once that I didn't have to carry everything alone, that I had you and everyone else supporting me? Well the same thing goes for you. You don't have to bear everything yourself."

"I have to bear this. This is my burden to carry."

"Damn it Asch!" Luke's calm front finally began to crack. He just couldn't take it anymore. It was always Asch, Asch, Asch. Why did he have to do everything himself? "Why? Why does it always have to be you? Why am I never good enough to do things, why do you always have to do it yourself?"

"Because I'm you big brother!" Asch snapped. "It's my job to protect you! I will never just stand by and watch you disappear! I can't just let you die!"

Luke was struck silent. All the pettiness and bitterness about Asch's firm resistance fell to pieces around him as he caught a glimpse into his sibling's world. How could he have been so blind? That Asch was angry, that he wasn't good enough... those were Luke's own excuses. He knew his sibling better than that. Behind everything Asch did there were always the same feelings, the same motivation driving his incomprehensible logic. Asch just wanted to protect: his family, his friends... those that he loved. No matter how awful the things he did had seemed, it had always been that one reason behind it all. But with everything that had happened, Luke had forgotten that, and in doing so, Luke honestly felt like he'd betrayed him.

Luke looked up and met his siblings gaze, smiling sadly he replied, "Yes, I am your little brother... and that's why no matter what happens, I can't change my mind. I won't go back on what I decided."

_for once, I'll protect you too._

"Damn it! Don't you get it?" Asch exploded, his whole body shaking in frustration. "You're the only one anyone cares about! Everyone would be devastated if you were to die! If I die instead, then it won't hurt everyone as much!"

"You don't honestly believe that?" Luke demanded in outrage.

"Are you blind? Did you see the fuss everyone put up when you said you would take my place? They were ready to attack Jade for even suggesting it! What about when I said I would do it in the first place? Did even one person other than you put up a fuss?"

"That's..."

"No! They were angry about the replicas, not once did anyone say anything! Not one person said they wanted me to live until you did that night! I'm not stupid; they've always been your friends, not mine. They would follow you to the ends of the world, they respect and care for you! You would be missed if you were to disappear! The world would keep going if it were me to leave."

"That's a lie! You're wrong! They care about you too!"


"It still doesn't matter!" Luke argued, fighting the knot in his throat. "I still won't let you do this. I'm not going back on what I decided."
Asch sighed. "I was hoping it wasn't going to come to this."

"What are you talking about?" Luke demanded but was startled when Asch flew towards him and landed a solid punch across his face. Luke stumbled back a step and caught his foot on a stray wire, crashing onto the hard tile floor.

Sitting up, Luke was about to demand what the hell that had been for when he noticed Asch leaving the room. The door closed, and Luke heard the sounds of a deadbolt sliding into place.

Asch hesitated for a moment but pulled the key from the door. No sooner had it left the lock did the inevitable pounding come as Luke fought against the barrier.

"Asch..." Natalia inquired hesitantly. "What are you doing?" She had asked, but she feared they all knew the answer.

'What are you doing! Don't do this Asch!' Luke's screams came across their connection when it was clear his voice wouldn't carry through the door. 'Let me out of here! This is my job! My responsibility! You have no right-!' Asch cut Luke off, closing his side of the connection off with a painful finality.

Asch turned around and walked up to Guy, dropping a key into the blond's hands. "Is this-?"

"The only key to that room," Asch answered. "Once all this is over, come back and let him out of there."

Guy clutched the key tightly in his hand, the sharp ridges digging into his skin as Luke's frantic pounding on the door echoed in the background. Guy now realized why Asch had come all the way back here. The doors weren't hollow and didn't reverberate; Luke's pounding wouldn't carry far. Without any regular traffic, it wasn't likely anyone would stumble across him in the 2 days this venture would take.

Guy also realized that Asch had just given him a straight up choice. He could just as easily turn around and unlock the door. Asch was telling him to choose who lived. Asch or Luke. How? How could he make that kind of choice?

"Ummm," Anise began. "Aren't you giving that key to the wrong person?"

Asch caught her eyes but didn't offer an answer. Instead he turned around and began making his way back. "Come on Noelle," he called. "We need to get to the Tower of Rem before it's too late."

"I don't get it!" Anise stated. "Why Guy? Guy's the most likely to let him out!"

"You're thinking about it backwards," Jade provided. "In Asch's eyes, Guy is the one who most wants Luke to live." Everyone's eyes turned to the blond.

"Asch is right," Guy finally spoke up, "we should get going."

"Are you sure about this?" Natalia asked.

Guy didn't answer, he simply kept walking. Adjusting his glasses, Jade followed suit and one by one so did the remainder of Luke's friends. With a glance behind him Asch confirmed for himself the words he'd said to Luke.

They all chose him.
It was a bittersweet realization. But as long as Luke was safe, it didn’t matter.

With one final look over his shoulder, Guy choked back the bile that crept into his throat as the sound of Luke's pounding faded away behind him.

Asch wasn't sure what to expect when returning to the Tower of Rem, but whatever it was, he didn't find it. To be precise, he didn't find anything. The place that had once been packed with replicas was completely devoid of any life save the monsters that crept about the shadows. Added to the miasma that had seeped in the massive structure, the entire tower had a haunted look to it that put everyone on edge. The feeling of impending death hung heavily in the air, silencing the few whispers that had been exchanged among them.

The young monarch was impressed and had thanked Noelle for getting them there so promptly. Looking up at the Tower, Asch felt a faint flutter in stomach but he wasn't going to back down. He didn't want to die, but letting Luke die wasn't an option either. If it weren't for his little brother, as far as he was concerned his life as he knew it would have ended 8 years ago. The time he had now, it was given to him by Luke, and he would return that time to his little brother, so that the world could be a brighter place. He believed that with all his heart.

"Oh boy," Anise muttered under her breath looking up at the Tower's heights. "I'd forgotten just how tall this place is."

"Do you think Luke will be alright?" Natalia asked, trying to detract from the subject at the forefront of her thoughts. "I mean, locked alone in that room for days..."

"Don't worry," Asch said simply, his voice somewhat cold. "The sink in there should still work so he'll have water. He'll go hungry, but he'll live." No one said another word on the issue.

"Where are all the replicas?" Anise asked. "You don't think they decided they wouldn't help and took off do you?"

"No," Jade mused. "A number that large would make quite an impact on whatever city they attempted to settle in, and I doubt they would manage to go unnoticed by the militaries. I'm certain we'd have heard something if they'd started moving."

"It's possible they split up," Tear suggested.

"No, their leader doesn't seem the type to make them all go their separate ways," Guy said.

"True," Natalia agreed. "Perhaps all the replicas that were due to come to the Tower have arrived at the top then."

"We won't know until we get there," Asch said, moving towards the control panel to the elevator. He observed the small fon machine and attempted several combinations of buttons before giving the machine a frustrated look. "Hey, old man."

"Don't you dare tell me you broke it!" Anise puffed up, but deflated when Asch's usual snarkiness didn't come flying back at her.

"No, but someone did," Jade answered. "Or rather than break it, it's locked down. By more than one password, I'm afraid even I wouldn't be able to access the controls, at least not before our friend back in Belkend starves to death."

"Great, just great!" Asch cursed. "I guess it's the stairs then."
"You have got to be kidding me!" Anise blurted out. "Going down them almost killed me last time, I am not going up."

"You can stay here then," Asch replied quietly.

"Wait-"

"The same goes for everyone," he added. "There's no reason for you guys to have to come all the way to the top. If you start heading back to Belkend you could get Luke sooner, just make sure the miasma is gone before you let him out."

"No," Jade stepped in. "You've decided to walk this path; then I at the very least, will see you through to the end of it."

"Jade..."

"Yeah!" Anise agreed. "The Colonel's right! We're not just going to leave to go... to go..." she couldn't bring herself to say it. "We're not gonna let you do this alone."

"I'd rather..." Natalia barely whispered. "I'd rather die then watch you vanish, then watch you disappear from my life. No matter what I said, I wouldn't have had the power to change your mind, would I?" Asch looked at her to see tears streaming down the princess' cheeks.

"Natalia-"

"Don't!" Natalia cut Asch off. "No matter how many times you say the decision was inevitable, it doesn't change the fact that you're leaving! It doesn't change that you're going to die!" Natalia's words echoed in the empty Tower.

"Maybe you should stay here then," Asch said solemnly.

"No! Asch don't you get it? It's because of everything we've shared... it's because I love you, that I have to come! I have to stay by your side until the end... because we swore that was where we'd remain!"

"For as long as we lived," Asch finished.

"We should be going," Jade commented. "Is anyone remaining here with Noelle?" The Colonel inquired, but met with four solemnly shaking heads. He sighed and adjusted his glasses. There would be many a piece to pick up when this was finally over.

It was one thing to talk about climbing the stairs, but a completely different one to actually do it. They'd been forced to stop and rest twice already and looking down, they didn't seem nearly high enough to merit the effort they'd exerted. Only Jade seemed completely unaffected, as he was with just about anything and Asch couldn't help but wonder where his stamina came from, or if there was anything in the world that could truly test its bounds. But stair after stair didn't so much as displace a hair on his head. More so than his stamina however, Asch couldn't get Jade's words out of his head.

I at the very least, will see you through to the end of it.

It was a statement that seemed so unlike the Jade he knew, or at least, it was unlike the Jade he'd met on the Tartarus outside the Cheagle Woods. Then again, Jade had changed too, hadn't he? He wasn't the cold, detached, calculating person he had once been. He had warmed up somewhat, if one could ever call Jade warm; he seemed more protective, and though he didn't overtly show it,
Asch knew he cared for and would fiercely defend his friends. Looking around at everyone climbing behind him... they'd all changed. Everyone in their group had grown, become stronger, better people... he alone was still the same. Trapped in time as the insecure 10-year old, scrambling for an identity he no longer truly possessed, living for the only thing he had to define himself. He hadn't moved or grown at all. This was where his path led him; this is where all his paths were destined to lead him. The only choice that was his to make, was whether his life would be used to protect or to destroy... and that wasn't a choice at all. Van's plans could go burn in hell.

"Finally..." Anise managed through laboured breaths. "We're almost-

"Halfway," Guy cut in and finished.

"Whaa-" Anise's outraged cry was cut short when Asch threw his hand over her mouth and practically threw her against the wall. The aura of urgency silenced any protests and with everyone else ducking against the wall, the sound of footsteps became audible.

"God-General," Asch cursed under his breath.

"Legretta from the looks of it," Guy replied. Standing closest to the corner, he had the best chance of catching a glimpse of the intruder.

"Is she alone?" Natalia asked.

"I don't see anyone else, but that may not mean much."

"What is Major Legretta doing here?" Tear whispered.

"I have no idea, but I doubt it's anything good," Asch answered.

"What are the chances we're going to get through this without a fight?" Guy asked.

"Not good," Asch answered, "especially since I doubt she's here to appreciate the history. Whatever she's here to do, it may be in our best interest to stop her."

"Asch is right," Tear agreed. She always hated the thought of challenging her former teacher, but they couldn't afford to let her brother's plans advance. With a confirmatory nod from everyone, they all burst around the corner.

"Well, well, well," Legretta fired a defensive shot that reflected off Guy's blade and into the wall. The blonde God-General had drawn one of her signature weapons but in her other hand, she held what looked to be a white envelope. The strange item caught everyone's attention. What was in there, and better yet, what was she doing with it here of all places? "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised to see you all here. It appears I waited too long after all."

"What are you doing here Legretta?" Natalia demanded.

"We can't just let you eliminate all the miasma, now can we?" A light went on in her opponent.

"You aren't as thick as you seem," Legretta commented.

"Why are you doing this Major?" Tear demanded. "Is what you're trying to achieve really worth the
blood that's being shed. Don't you have any attachment to this world and the people in it? Is there really nothing worth saving?"

"You already know the answer to that," Legretta tucked the envelope into her uniform's pocket. "There is no sacrifice too small to make for the future!"

Jade launched himself at the God-General but her hand was faster and the second gun fired a shot that the Colonel just barely dodged. Three more cleverly placed shots put him on the defensive and Asch was quick to draw Legretta's fire. Stupid Jade, Asch blocked her shots but she was disguising their trajectory making defending challenging at best. Still, he had a better time of it with his sword than Jade did with that spear of his. It may lend him more mobility but the low surface area made it much harder to block any kind of projectile.

Guy jumped into the fight right behind Asch and Anise was quick to try and cut Legretta off but the God-General was far too quick and she slipped through them. Tear's barrier deflected her counterattack sending another round of metal bullets to the ground. Natalia struck with a barrage of arrows and forced Legretta on the defensive.

Recovering from Legretta's slip, Asch took the God-General on in close quarters, closing the distance between them. She easily matched his strikes, but while she was occupied in defending, she couldn't use those same guns to shoot, and left 5 others to do as they pleased.

"What's this? Eager to throw your life away?" Legretta inquired. "You've wasted so much potential. You could have put that life of yours to use. You still can, it's not too late to help the Commandant."

"How many god-damn times are you going to ask me that?" Asch spat in frustration, his anger giving Legretta the chance to throw his attack back. "I've already told you, you can take that lunatic's half baked plans and let them burn in hell. For being the supposedly logical one, you've sure got issues staying grounded."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Legretta demanded.

"You can't honestly tell me you think this crazy plan of his is going to work!" Asch replied.

"Of course it will!" Legretta swung around Jade's art and landed a shot that grazed Asch's arm. The pain was superficial but enough to distract him and Asch nearly took two clean hits before Guy stepped in and Natalia tended the injury.

"Really?" The blond questioned. "And what do you think your place is in this so-called world of Van's? Where's your place in his future? Cause the way I see it, you have none!"

"You know nothing of the Commandant's plans!" Legretta's three shots missed their target.

"I think you're the one who can't see," Jade taunted. "You're too close to the matter to view it objectively. Otherwise you'd realize that you've no place in the world Van intends to create. You've been blinded."

"Lies! Don't think you can poison me with those words of yours, Necromancer! I have not been blinded."

"Then what is the point of replacing everyone with replicas?" Tear asked.

"The replicas will replace their originals and eliminate all ties to the Score in the new world. It will be a world pure and free of Yulia's poison, one with an infinite number of futures; a world that has
the potential to end in happiness."

"So then what about you and my brother?" Tear asked. "If no one in this world can escape the Score as you say, then what about the two of you? Are you to be killed and replaced in this new world as well?"

"O-Of course not! We will oversee the new world order until our time comes to pass." Legretta ducked down tripping Guy and sending him crashing towards Jade's arte. The blond narrowly avoided the impact. Damn she was good. She may only be one person but with six on one, they were getting in each other's way, and she used every bit of it to her advantage.

"Then according to what you're saying, this new world of Van's is doomed anyway. As long as all of you are there," Asch began, seeing where Jade had been going when he began this argument. All the God-General's preaching about Van's plans contradicted itself. But what then were the Commandant's true intentions, he wondered. "So even if any of us came with you, we're all just going to die anyway. If I have to pick a way to go, it's going to be for what I believe in, and it's going to be with some self respect!"

"This world is dying, and nothing can be done to stop it!" Legretta argued back, her voice no longer the strong confident one it had been before. "You may delay it today but you only buy yourself time; months, maybe a year or two if you're lucky. There is no escaping the Score, the planet's memory that is set on destruction; it will follow that path no matter how often you attempt to set it astray. The only hope for salvation is in Van's world!"

"Is that what you believe Major? Or are those my brother's words?" Legretta hesitated for a moment. In a split second she blocked Asch's strike and returned to the fight, but it wasn't a gesture Tear missed.

"I believe in Van's ideals. I believe in his dreams for the world!" But her voice didn't sound quite as certain as it had before. "I will do everything in my power to see those dreams realized! To see him achieve his goals!"

"But what about you Major, what are your views of the world? What are your goals? Or are you nothing more than my brother's puppet?" Tear accused, earning her a harsh yet somehow hurt look from her former instructor.

"His goals are mine so long as I serve him," Legretta answered with a shot at her pupil. "If you will stand in our way, it hurts me to say this, but I will eliminate you as well."

"Then start with me!" Guy's attack came from Legretta's blind spot and the God-General barely got out of the way but not before losing her balance and crashing to the stone floor. A white envelope flew from her uniform and Guy snatched it from the air. Rolling out of her fall Legretta came back at him.

"Give that back!" Legretta launched.

"Don't forget about me!" Asch shouted. Slipping under the God-General, his elbow came straight up into her chest with a sickening crunch. Asch spun around with his blade but she managed to escape the path of the attack. Suddenly breathing heavily, Legretta clutched her chest. Judging by how much pain she looked to be in, and adding the fact that she was apt as Tear at masking said pain, he'd gotten at least three or four ribs.

Her free hand still pointing a gun at them all she said, "You may have won today but don't think this is over. You will never save this world. Whether you succeed in stopping us or not, this world
still ends."

"No, this world will not end, it will be protected by the hopes of its people," Tear countered.

"I never thought you to be so naive, Tear," Legretta stated solemnly. "I'm disappointed."

Stepping behind some debris, the God-General vanished down some sort of ventilation or maintenance shaft. "Damn," Asch cursed still looking down after her. "It would have been nice to get her out of the way once and for all. Oh-" Asch suddenly realized the implications of his words. "Sorry... Tear."

Tear looked up at him with a smile.

"What?"

"I think that's the first time you've ever apologized to me."

"Well I'm not Luke, I don't do stupid things I need to apologize for left, right and center," he shot back, suddenly embarrassed.

"Hey Guy!" Anise called, placing Tokunaga back on her back. "What did you get off of Legretta?"

"I don't know but..." Guy said hesitantly, holding up the envelope. It was completely blank except for a name in small cursive script on the front.

*Mary*

"That doesn't look like Major Legretta's handwriting," Tear said examining the envelope closer. "It reminds me more of Major Cantabile's."

"Cantabile wrote this?"

"I can't be sure," Tear replied, her eyes suddenly on the ground. "Just that it looked similar."

"That's impossible," Guy said opening the envelope.

"Guy!" Natalia protested.

"What is the matter Princess?" Jade stepped in.

"Forgive me but I feel this is a bit unfair. It isn't our place to be reading such things."

"There is a chance it could contain information on our enemies and their goals or strategies," Jade said simply. "This is hardly the situation to be concerned about overstepping personal boundaries."

"Well Guy," Anise asked eagerly. "What does it say? What does it say?"

But the blonde's face had gone white and the arms holding the letter weren't very steady anymore. "I take it Cantabile really did write that letter then," Asch stated.

"I'd say that's a fair assumption," Jade agreed.

"Can you read it out loud or do you want me to?" Asch asked.

Guy shook his head, trying to snap out of what ever had come over him. "I-I'm fine, I can read it." So taking a deep breath to settle the pit in his stomach, he did.
I don't know why I'm writing this letter. I know that replicas don't have the memories of their originals, but I think that deep down somewhere, both you and your original share the same essence. You wouldn't be the replicas' leader otherwise. You share that same charisma and strength that Mary once had, so just this once, I ask you for your indulgence. If you're reading this letter then I'm probably having a nice long chat with your original. I'm not usually the type to be melodramatic like this, but if nothing else, I want to leave these feelings behind. I had always admired Mary, even when I was young, she always stood up for what she believed in, she never gave up and she would stop at nothing to make sure a wrong was made right again. I'm so sorry that I never succeeded in reviving Hod like I'd meant to. I know the decision that you're trying to make, that the redhead brat offered you; follow your heart, I'm sure that same strength that always guided Mary will find its way to you too. So who knows, maybe I'll see you soon, then the three of us will have to harass that little brother of your original's until it's his turn. Until then-

PS. If you can, tell Gailardia I'm sorry. I'm not as strong as he is, and I can't forgive everything that's been done. I can't help but wonder if he isn't right after all, but I don't know anymore. I guess I'll just leave it up to this Planet's Memory to decide, and whatever will be, will be.

"Guy..." Natalia motioned to put a hand on his shoulder, but retracted it. The blond took another deep breath.

"We need to save this world," Guy said. "For her sake too."

"For everyone who's died so we can make it this far," Asch agreed.

"Yeah," Anise agreed. "For Ion... and for Gloomietta too."

"Then let's go," Asch motioned towards the stairs.

"Let's go," Guy agreed. Carefully he folded the letter, and placed it in his pocket. For everyone's sake, they couldn't falter now. Not when they'd come so far. Luke... Guy's eyes followed Asch up the stairs.

I'm sorry.

The final set of stairs felt much longer than Asch could have imagined. Between the fight with Legretta and Cantabile's letter, no one was in the mood to talk. Everything that was about to happen weighed down on Asch in ways he didn't think were possible. Every step brought him closer to his end, every step closer to losing absolutely everything.

No sacrifice is too great for the sake of the future!

Legretta's words rang true and Asch hated the truth in it. Natalia had said it once too, that if Asch went through with this, he was no better than Van. He couldn't deny those words... but he would accept that hatred, all their feelings and the consequences of those feelings... because he desired a future more than anything else. A future for those he cared about, a place where they could all be happy. He was beginning to see just how Van had gotten to the extremes he'd reached.

No! No he wasn't like Van! He would never be like that Score-crazed lunatic! Van was willing to destroy the entire world so he could replace it! He was sacrificing innocent people! Like you're sacrificing innocent replicas. No! Van had set these motions into place himself! He had triggered the occurrence of these terrible events. Asch was different! He was doing this so he could protect! So he could protect the people he cared about... Natalia... Luke.

A faint light came from ahead of them, they were almost at the top. Asch stared at the approaching
exit, his heart accelerating with each step, but he forced his panic under control. He had decided, this was what he would do. There were no other choices, and he was not going to spend his last moments consumed by terror. The young monarch took a deep breath, and then another, taking his racing heart by the reins. No, he was going to do this so his little brother could be happy, and so that he would have a world through which to spread his light and his smile.

And maybe, just maybe, someday Luke would forgive him.

The top level of the Tower was completely silent. Thousand of replicas were standing soundlessly in the breeze that swept through the space. The miasma danced around following the wind but never truly dissipating. The silence was haunting. Every replica here, stood with a look of death in their eyes, a complete acceptance of their fate. Asking them for their answer was pointless; it showed in every whisper of their demeanour. That wasn't what had Asch's heart in his throat; it wasn't what had awakened every terror the redhead had ever known.

Asch's heart came to a grinding halt, because standing before them, with that same look of acceptance in his eyes... was Luke.
There were so many thoughts flying through Asch's mind that there may as well have been none at all. Standing atop the Tower of Rem, the rest of the world completely faded away into the miasma, every other factor besides the one standing in front of him became instantly irrelevant. Only the burning of his chest told him he'd yet to take a proper breath. His brain raced in endless circles each time coming back to the same haunting question: how? How had Luke gotten out of that room? How had he gotten here before them? How could he be doing this? How? How had it come to down to this? To losing his one and only little brother? How?

It didn't take a genius to see how well Luke had played his hand, and Jade simply watched Asch reel as his shock faded to panic and then inexorably through to anger. Anger at himself, anger at the inevitability of today's events, it mattered little, really. It was the entirety of Asch's personae to grow angry at the things he couldn't control. Much like a wounded animal, he knew nothing but how to lash out when he was in pain, when he was hurting, fighting emotions he couldn't begin to deal with. And such was the storm that had descended over him. So much so that Jade surmised he hadn't even taken a proper look at the details. Jade himself had already pieced together Luke's entire scheme. A clever one indeed, and one that had taken no small effort or foresight to orchestrate. However, now that he was here, there would be no escaping, no more turntable. Whether he completed the task of eliminating the miasma or not, Luke's short existence would end here.

The silence between them all seemed endless but even Jade dared not shatter it at this point; the tension under which the fragile balance of emotions held was unimaginably tight. Asch wasn't the only one it was trying, Tear seemed ready to shatter at the lightest impact, and the others would undoubtedly follow shortly behind her. Yet, despite all that was occurring before him, despite all Jade knew was about to occur, and despite the fact he could feel the quickening of his own pulse, Jade couldn't help but wonder. At what point, had they all become so beholden to emotion?

Asch finally gave way to his screaming lungs, fighting through the constricted chest that was crushing his now racing heart. There had to be something... something he hadn't seen, something he hadn't taken into account. The small amounts of oxygen he now inhaled helped slow his crashing mind, heralding the return of logic and order to the chaotic mess of panic. With Luke's piercing eyes never detracting from his own, Asch's sprinting heart didn't slow in the least.

Finally gathering himself together, Asch managed a single faltered word. "How?"

Luke's reply was simple, a piteous yet victorious expression dawning his face.

"You're really slipping if you thought a locked door was going to keep me from making sure you don't disappear." He said, his soft voice carrying across the platform. "Didn't I tell you? I'm not going to let you die, no matter what."

"No!" The word was out of Asch's mouth before Luke had even finished his statement. His denial so complete, it sent a wave of pain across Luke's face. "I don't know how you got here but you're going to take that same route and get the hell out of here. So help me Lorelei, if I have to haul you down each and every one of the Score-forsaken stairs myself, I will. Go back, Luke; get out of here!"


"You want to bet?"
"Asch!" Luke snapped in desperation, reeling himself in when he caught himself. "Asch... Open your eyes for a minute."

"Sorry honey," the sweet voice rang clearly atop the silent tower. "But this was a one way trip, hate to say it, but there's no going back the way we came."

Asch shook his head a moment. He knew the voice, he'd heard it crawl from the shadows so many times... how could he not? But placing her here of all places was completely impossible. Impossibility, however, didn't seem to be a factor that hindered his little brother and Noir shot him a playful wink as she dangled a lone silver key from her finger. Walking up to the older redhead with her usual gait, she dropped the key into his hands. One glance down at the object told him exactly what it was.

When his head shot back up, he was met with a finger to his lips and Noir's face dangerously close to his own. "Sorry sweetheart," she said, a solemn look passing over her normally indecipherable manner. "But the kid wins this one."

Leaving Asch completely speechless, the key he'd given to Guy sitting innocently in his hand, Noir slipped around him and made her way towards the staircase. Only one last call halted her in her steps.

"Noir," Jade called.

"Yes, what can I do for you handsome?" she asked with a playful wink.

"Please have those henchman of yours unlock the elevator for the trip back down." Noir grinned like a child caught in a good prank.

"Sure thing," she replied, vanishing completely from sight.

Jade returned his attention to the redheads in front of him and with a sigh he adjusted his glasses. "It's nice to see you here as well, Ginji."

Asch's attention was drawn from the key in his hands to the young pilot whose blue jacket was only partially visible from behind Luke. Asch felt his stomach tie into knots as the entirety of Luke's plan fell into place. Nothing other than an Albiore could have gotten Luke here so quickly, and with the elevator locked down by the Dark Wings so only Luke could use it, it wasn't surprising he'd managed to slip up here just in time. But... but how? To have involved Noir and even Ginji... Luke had to have planned this out before he'd even announced his plans to the others! The sickening feeling was replaced by a white hot coal that burned in his chest; why had everyone betrayed him like this? Even... even Guy! There was no way he accidently had the key stolen! He had gone and let Noir take it! How could he betray... betray Luke like that? And- and- Ginji!

The renewed anger must have been painted clearly on his face for Ginji took a hesitant step back before finally stepping forward. "I-I'm sorry Asch..."

"Damn it, Ginji!" Asch's voice was desperate now, defeated and grasping at broken straws. "Why? How could you do this? I thought- I thought we were- You should have known!"

"It's because we're friends that I can't just sit back and watch you die!" Ginji shouted, his voice echoing across the paralyzed platform. "Because you're my friend! Because we've been through all this together! Because after everything we've taken on together... I can't bear to lose you!"

Luke gave Ginji a reassuring smile but it didn't seem to help. Asch saw the pilot mouth 'I'm sorry' to his sibling. Luke returned with a 'thank you' before the pilot shuffled over, moving to stand by
Guy and refusing to look Asch in the eye.

"I don't care what you think you've concocted here, Luke you are not doing this! I'm not having this argument with you! If I have to beat you until you're unconscious and drag you away from here I will!"


"No I haven't!" Every muscle in Asch's body tensed and his face was turning red from frustration. Beneath all that though, every inch of him was frozen to the very core. Frozen in terror, paralyzed by an unnameable fear that overturned all rationality; only his instincts reacted to the words he was hearing but that just compounded the fear. Desperation so complete, Asch had never known. He just couldn't! He couldn't lose Luke! He'd rather die! "This isn't over yet, damn it! This isn't over while I'm still breathing! If you want to do this you're going to have to kill me to do it!"

Asch reached for his blade but before his right arm had moved an inch, an incredibly powerful force ensnared his wrist and his entire arm froze. Twisting to see the identity of his captor, Asch saw the last person he expected to see standing in his way.

"Jade!" Asch barely got out another protest before crying out in pain as the Necromancer twisted his arm into submission. When Asch tried to retaliate, he found his second arm bound, both tied behind his back in an inescapable clasp. The redhead fought and fought and fought but every effort was nothing before Jade's grasp and Asch only found his energy sapped and his bond tighter.

"You've lost, Asch," Luke repeated. Asch's head flew back around. Impossible, this was all so impossible! It had to be some kind of nightmare! This couldn't be happening. This couldn't really be happening!

But as Asch was about to discover, this was one nightmare from which he would never wake.

"You've been so focused on the end that you can't see the bigger picture." Luke walked up to his big brother until they were standing face to face. Reaching over and unclasping Asch's weapon, Luke claimed the Sword of Lorelei, sheathe and all; leaning in close, he whispered in Asch's ear. "I told you, you were wrong. They have always been your friends and they will always care about you. Just like I will."

Stepping back Luke smiled sadly. 'I'm sorry,' he said silently using their connection where the words didn't threaten to shatter his fragile front. 'You know I am, and I know you can't accept it now... but can I ask you one last favour?' Luke's eyes wrenched Asch's heart from his chest. His mind wasn't capable of the words for a reply, caught up as they were in the deepening sense of dread at the inevitable conclusion of this path.

'One day, once all this is over,' Luke continued painfully. 'Do you think you could find it in you... to forgive me for this?'

A tense silence presided for but a second before Asch's flailing renewed with a vigour the Colonel had never witnessed in Asch. Words never came, just a desperate struggle full of violent emotion. Whatever Luke had said, Jade wished he hadn't, be it for the sake of keeping Asch here, or even for Asch's own sake. Given the probable outcome of today's events, whatever Luke had said was entirely too cruel. Even in fighting for his own life, Asch had never conjured this strength, but it was entirely in vain. There would be no escaping from the position he was in, and as cruel as it was, Asch would watch every moment of what was about to occur. Because while watching Luke die would destroy him, not doing so would haunt the boy forever.
"No! Luke!" Asch's desperate screams tore through every heart on the platform. No more than one or two words, all he could manage, but the raw agony they carried was enough to strike each and every person on whose ears they fell. Natalia could no longer bring herself to watch and she felt the silent tears falling. She may be able to avert her eyes, but nothing would shield her from the screams. As each pleading cry increased in desperation, her chest seized and a sob escaped the Princess despite her resolve to stand proud for her cousin. Fruitlessly wiping her eyes, Natalia forced herself to look up again; if Luke could make the ultimate sacrifice, then the least she could do... the only thing she could do for him, was muster the strength to watch him in his last moments.

Asch wasn't even coherent anymore as he succumbed completely to panic. His mind couldn't string together a thought, there was only rejection, despair, agony; a fight against the inevitable. Fighting against his restraint Asch felt his heart being ripped from his chest. The warm flame that had once comforted him was now burning him alive as he screamed frantically. He had to do something! He had to get through to Luke. He had to- to-

Luke could see Asch struggling from the corner of his eye, his older brother's frantic screaming driving a dagger down his throat. He didn't want to do this! He wanted to live. He wanted to go home with Asch and go back to the lazy days at the manor; go back to the days he sat in the sun-filled courtyard and dreamed up adventures while watching Asch train. He wanted to go back to the days where he, Asch, Ion, Guy, Tear... where everyone sat laughing; where there were no tears, no loss, no sacrifice. He wanted to be there, to see them all happy. That path... those days, they were gone. All he could ask was to see them smile one last time, but he knew that was impossible now. He would never see their smiles again. Luke choked back as he felt his chest heave. He would be gone, but he would build a world where they could have all those things.

A world of sunshine, smiles and laughter... that would be his legacy.

"Are you prepared?" Mary asked.

Luke wiped his eye with palm of his hand and smiled sadly. "Yeah," he said softly. "I'm ready whenever you guys are."

Mary waved her arm and the mass of replicas began to move, forming a circle around everyone. Luke watched them and turned his eyes back to Mary. "I'm sorry. I wish I didn't have to ask this of you."

"It is alright," Mary said with a soft smile. "We will join you on your journey, for the sake of all our brethren, so they may have a place to live." Luke had never seen her smile before, and in it he could see the kind and gentle person that Guy's sister had once been. To see that emotion one last time, put his heart at ease.

*This is the world we will leave behind.*

As if reacting to Luke's acceptance, the replicas took a few steps inward, closing in the circle. Tear's shoulders began to shake; Asch began to fight harder... but time pressed forward; events set into motion.

"Luke! Stop! Please stop! Don't do this! Don't-" Asch screamed desperately. "Don't leave me alone!" Luke's head turned. As if that last cry had taken the last of his energy, Asch sank, only Jade's firm grip kept him from completely falling to the ground. Every ounce of strength drained from him; the older redhead had nothing left. "Don't... don't leave me..."

"Asch..."
"Don't leave me by myself..."

'I'll always be with you... you know that, right?'

At those simple words, Asch's head flew up and the brothers met eye to eye. There weren't words, for this moment, for the rush of emotions that flew through him, there would never be any sort of description for that kind of agony. Asch only knew of the warmth he saw in Luke's gaze. Shock paralyzed his mind while his body shook under the crushing weight of it all. In his last moments, Luke was lending him what little strength he had left, the last of his light in a world that suddenly seemed pitch black. No, it couldn't end this way. It couldn't all come down to this! All those years, all the experiences, the good and the bad, the bright and the lonely, this wasn't the summation of it all! This wasn't the path he wanted! This wasn't the future, this wasn't! It wasn't right! He'd spent eight years for what? Eight years so a day like this would never come! If this went through to the end, to the inevitable conclusion... then what was the point? What had his life meant? What had he been living for?

Asch's flailing renewed with incredible vigour, his shining eyes ablaze as he fought against Jade with every breadth of his being. From deep within the hoards of guilt, seeing Asch fight so hard reassured Luke. That was the light he knew, the stubborn never-give-up fire that he admired in his older brother. As long as Asch had that, Luke knew he would never falter. And that was all he needed to know.

"I think it's time," Luke said turning to Mary. The blonde replica nodded her head and there were many reassuring mumbles from the crowd. "Thank you, all of you. Regardless of your reasons, we owe you everything."

Luke pulled the sheath from the Sword of Lorelei and Asch felt the hysteria consume him. There wasn't any more time! He had to- Every thought suddenly came to a screeching halt. So faint, it was next to impossible to see through the miasma, but a glimmer of light caught Asch's eye. Impossible! His eyes flew up to Luke but his sibling was still saying something to the replicas. There was no doubt though, dim as it was, the Sword of Lorelei was glowing.

"Luke!" Asch called, but Luke didn't turn his way. He had to make Luke see! Didn't he realize? He had the Jewel! He had the Jewel the whole time! No wonder they'd never found it! Even with Luke holding the Sword it was barely glowing, it was so faint even Luke hadn't noticed it, but it was really there! "Luke! Stop! Luke- don't- Luke!"

He had to get Luke to listen! That was why Luke was doing this! Luke felt he had to atone, that he hadn't gotten the Jewel so he had to make things right! If he could only get Luke to see! If he could get Luke to see then this wouldn't be happening! If he could just make Luke understand then his only little brother wouldn't have to die! He wouldn't have to lose everything! He wouldn't be left alone!

"Luke stop! You can't! Wait! Luke!" Asch cursed and cursed and cursed but the harder he tried, the more the words wouldn't come. No! He had to make Luke understand! Luke had the Jewel! He didn't have to do this!

"Luke don't-! The Jewel! You have- Stop! We need the Jewel- You can't-!"

"You'll find the Jewel," Luke finally replied, unable to quell the overflowing with regret, unable to avoid a response. He was making it harder than it had to be, but Asch just had to see. He could do this, he would do this, and the world would be a better place for having him in it. "You'll find it and you'll free Lorelei and stop Master Van. I know you can, nothing's ever stood in your way once you've set your mind on it."
"No! That's not- That's not it! I can't- You-!"

Luke set down the Sword of Lorelei. The whole world went silent, the mumbles of the replicas, the whistling of the winds; the very air around them grew dead and reality dissolved. The world became nothing but Luke, now standing in front of him with a single hand gripping Asch's shoulder. Every word Asch struggled to procure, that fought to scream out caught in his throat as his windpipe became a mangled knot, the only barrier to his heaving stomach. Luke trapped Asch's gaze firmly in his own and that moment stood frozen in time, one that Asch, no matter how much he wanted to, would never forget.

"Thank you for everything," Luke finally said, the finality in his voice excruciating. "For these eight years, for all the times you protected me, the times you scolded me, the times you helped me. I've spent my entire life respecting you, admiring you... looking up to the person you are and dreaming I could be half that person. You're strong, stronger than I ever was, and you have an amazing heart. Nothing that happens today will change that. You have to live on, you have to. So that the rest of this world can see what I've seen, so they can see the future you will build."

"No! Luke... no!"

"Goodbye, Asch."

"Luke! Luke come back! You can't! You can't do this! Luke!"

Asch's cries fell on dead air as even the wind silenced. Retrieving the Sword of Lorelei, the Seventh Fonons in the air began to resonate. Luke closed his eyes, though it had been a long time since he needed to do that to focus. The response of the fonons was immediate and fluid, the effortless a stark contrast to the boy who almost a year ago couldn't even get them to come. No, Luke closed his eyes and focused on his breathing, because if he thought on anything else... if he let his fear take hold, he would falter and he would fail. He wanted to live, he wanted to stop this; with every essence of his being, he wished this wasn't the last time he would see his friends... the last time he would ever see Asch. Luke just wanted his story to have a happy ending, but he knew better than that now. The miasma had to vanish, the replicas had to die... and he would be the one to orchestrate it all. Orchestrate their demise, orchestrate his friends’ misery; his last act would be a massacre.

It was only in stories that endings were so kind.

"No Luke stop!" This time it was Tear's scream that pierced the air and the melodist flew towards the redhead. In her recklessness, she hadn't stopped to think. She reacted from the bottom of her heart, the heart that was screaming in agony, that couldn't bear the thought of watching Luke vanish. There were no consequences to consider, no pain to realize save the anguish of her own soul. She couldn't stand and do nothing anymore! She wasn't going to let this world take him from her!

"Don't come closer!" Luke yelled and she hesitated for a split second. Guy jumped in front of her, grabbing her shoulder and bracing against the struggling melodist. Arms outstretched, Tear reached; but her outstretched hand didn't even come close. Luke was still beyond her.

"Luke, no don't! You can't do this, I l-"

"Tear!" Luke harshly cut her off.

"No..." Tear buried her head in Guy's shoulder, and while she did not cry, her entire body shook.
"Guy..." Luke's sorrowful voice was barely louder than a whisper. "Thank you."

"Idiot," Guy cursed.

There was nothing but darkness, darkness and warmth as Tear hid in Guy's arms, hiding from reality, from the pain, and from a loss she couldn't begin to fathom. Bracing herself against the blond's strong grasp, she felt him shaking as well.

It was a field of selenias, Tear's personal sanctuary. Luke stood in the center, his warm eyes full of sorrow, shining as he watched the heavens, softening when they met her own. A single white blossom, tucked behind her ear. An empty garden, a bitter farewell.

Sun streamed through the trees, a secret out in the open; Luke crying. A story that seemed like a dream, a boy who was really just a child. A leap of faith for the light she just couldn't extinguish; a hatred put to rest by his endless smile.

A lonely hospital room, a harsh reality delivered. She sat on a bed, suppressing feelings she shouldn't have. A worthy sacrifice, a righteous cause, a world she loved more than anything. He was the only one to remain, even with her protests. His back was warm, strong, his hand comforting around hers. He never saw her weakness, only gave her his strength.

Grand Chokmah's streets, bustling but empty to her eyes, only his red hair gleaming golden in the sunlight mattered to her. Standing on the bridge he asked her. The water rustling below them she answered.

I want to know you. I want to know you so I can decide what I believe. I want to see where you go and what you will do. I will watch you, until the day all this is over... I will watch you.

I will watch you until the end...

No matter how much it hurt, no matter how hopeless she felt, she had promised him. She had sworn and she owed it to Luke, as a friend, and as the woman who couldn't begin to tell him how complete he made her world. Raising her eyes she caught a final glimpse, one last split second when her gaze met his and he was hers alone.

"Luke!" Tear's cry came too late, and a brilliant golden sea swallowed them all.

The crash of the Sword as it pierced the stone of the Tower's roof echoed, the golden winds beginning to swirl forming a veritable vortex engulfing everyone who stood here. The nearest replicas began to shimmer and one by one they burst into fonons, the golden lights only adding to the brilliance of the maelstrom.

"No! Let go!" Asch started flailing even harder, drawing strength from reserves the redhead didn't think he possessed. "Damn it Jade! Let go! Stop this! Why? Let go! Let go, he's going to die! Yulia damn it all, Jade let go!" Asch's cries were filled with an agony even the Necromancer had never heard, but his grip remained firm and Asch stood no chance of escaping. "Why Jade? Why are you doing this? Luke's going to die!

Jade offered Asch no reply.

"Why? Why are you letting him die?"

The Cathedral was silent in the dead of night where the Colonel stood thinking. Luke had dropped quite the bombshell with his earlier declaration that he would take Asch's place and despite all
Jade's efforts, despite all his training, he still could not even propose a feasible alternative. What a
fickle thing knowledge could be; useless when needed, pointless when not. He heard the voices in
the distance, then the soft sound of approaching footsteps. Standing up from where he had been
leaning against the railing, Jade adjusted his glasses.

"Luke."

"Jade."

"Do you have a few words for me too?" Luke asked; clearly he'd already met the others.

"Not particularly," the Necromancer replied, returning to his place on the railing. Luke silently
joined him, leaning on the railing next to the Colonel watching the guards stand dutifully at the
entrance, shuffling every few moments to keep from falling asleep.

"You know," Jade finally spoke up. "I would understand completely if you chose to hate me."

"Why would I hate you?"

"Even if you were to disappear, we would still have Asch. His hyperresonance is more stable than
your own, and his chances of possessing the ability to free Lorelei are greater. The miasma would
be gone, and the decreased number of replicas would create less problems for both countries.
From a logical stand point, it's the best possible course of action."

"And what about from your standpoint?" Luke asked.

Jade couldn't resist a smirk. "As a friend, I feel somewhat compelled to stop you, as I felt
compelled to try and stop Asch. But it seems neither of you are so easily swayed."

"Thank you, Jade."

"I can't imagine why you would feel the need to thank me."

"I'm glad to hear that you think of us as your friends, that means a lot."

"Yes, well, I can be rather cold; I can see how you'd misunderstand."

"No, not at all," Luke shook his hands defensively.

"Luke..." Jade said, his solemn voice piercing the heavy atmosphere. "I'm sorry."

And for the first time since Luke had met the man, he truly meant it.

"Jade, can I ask a favour of you?"

"What is it?"

"Will," Luke hesitated for a moment. "Will you help me do this?"

"Oh?" The Colonel inquired, fully catching the undertones in Luke's request. "You think Asch may
try something?"

"Yeah. I don't know how, exactly, but I know he will," Luke replied, trying to take on a joking tone
but still failing to sound light-hearted. "Asch likes to have things his own way."

"I see."
"Will you promise me you won’t let him interfere once we get up there?" The redhead asked. "If you can do that, the rest I’ll take care of on my own."

Silence consumed them as Jade deeply contemplated the request.

"Please, Jade?"

"Alright, you have my word," he said solemnly, adjusting his glasses. "I’ll see you through until the end."

The storm of fonons grew in intensity, consuming replica upon replica with Luke standing alone in the center. The Sword of Lorelei was fully aglow, seeped in the aura that stemmed from Luke who stood over it, fuelling the hyperresonance. The task that had begun so simply now drew every bit of his focus as Luke struggled to keep everything together. He could feel it, a strange force pulling him away as his consciousness seemed to spread out. A vague feeling of dissociation detracted what little focus he could pull together. Was this it? Was this how it would end? This consuming feeling of indifference and peace... inviting him into a vast expanse of the unknown. The reaction weakened. No! He had to focus! He had to do this; he had to make sure the miasma went away! For everyone who was counting on him, for the replicas who had sacrificed their lives... and for the friends he had asked to suffer... he had to!

But he was so tired...

Something was wrong; Asch's senses flared. Something wasn't right... something other than the fact that this whole damn situation shouldn't even be happening. The fonons, the hyperresonance that had once ploughed forward with such force, such disregard to the lives it was consuming, was weakening. It couldn't be over yet, the miasma wasn't gone! Why was it slowing down? It couldn't! If the reaction stopped before the miasma was neutralized then everyone would have died for nothing! Luke would have sacrificed himself for nothing!

'Come on Luke! You've got to pull it together!' Asch's voice wavered. In the heat of the moment all the anger and terror had been set aside. It wasn't about Asch anymore; it wasn't about his selfishness, his inability to deal with the thought of having to stand on his own without Luke to catch him when he fell, it wasn't even about the fact that he couldn't step back long enough to see what Luke might have wanted. It was about being there for Luke; about being there for his little brother like Luke had always been there for him.

But Asch's words seemed to echo, reverberating off the empty walls of Luke's mind. 'Luke!' Asch's call was unanswered. Luke seemed all over the place, Asch caught whispers of his presence, of his desperately struggling will, but they were as quick to vanish as they were to appear. 'Luke, you've got to focus! You can do this! I believe in you! Focus!'

Luke's flickering mind seemed to steady, the struggle to maintain his existence put a strain on even Asch who was only watching on. Luke was fighting; fighting with every bit of strength he could muster but the hyperresonance wasn't responding. The reaction was fading. No! No, if it didn't pick up soon all this would be for nothing! They'd fail! Luke was fighting his hardest, he could do this!

Why? Why wasn't it getting any better?

The Jewel!

Of course! The Jewel of Lorelei dispersed fonons; Luke was fighting not only to maintain a hyperresonance on the scale no one had ever seen, but he was fighting against the Jewel's ability to scatter fonons! There was no way he was going to be able to succeed. He was already getting
caught up in his own reaction, struggling to hold through to the end. He didn't have the strength left to fight against the Jewel!

"Let go of me Jade!" The Colonel was almost surprised when Asch suddenly began to struggle again. He had fallen completely still in the last few moments; finally accepting what was transpiring perhaps, but whatever the reason he'd ceased his resistance.

"Jade let go! You have to let go!" Asch could feel his arm ready to pull from his socket but still he fought. He had to get over there, he had to help Luke! It was all going to be for nothing! "Jade let go! Luke's going to die! He's going to die for nothing! Let go!" Jade couldn't see it; Jade didn't know! He hadn't seen the sword glowing; he didn't know the Jewel was there! Asch had to get free! He could help Luke! He could stop this from failing! He just had to get free! Maybe it wasn't his right to ignore Luke's ability to make his own choices, but he had not spent eight years to end up sitting uselessly by the sidelines! This was not how things were going to end!

It was so sudden, Asch nearly crashed forward. The pressure against his wrists had vanished, the muscles in his arms started to spasm, protesting the restraint but Asch didn't notice any of this. Looking over his shoulder, for a split second frozen in time, his eyes met Jade's and the message was clear.

Go.

Asch sprinted forward, the world around him suddenly accelerating as his perception of time returned to normal. Everything around him was spinning and it took all of Asch's focus to stay on his own two feet. The swirling golden mass, though slowed still left his world a dizzying mess, but that didn't matter. He just had to get to Luke!

Grabbing the Sword of Lorelei's hilt, Asch carefully began to add his own power to Luke's, strengthening the focal point of the reaction. Luke barely held onto the sword anymore, his fingers only loosely wrapped themselves around the grip. Asch forced himself to concentrate. This had to be a success, he couldn't let this fail after coming so far, after Luke had gotten them so far! Ignoring just how glazed over Luke's eyes had become, how much he resembled an empty vessel... Asch concentrated entirely on the hyperresonance. The reaction picked up and the golden mass picked up speed.

"Asch?"

As if his power had awakened something in Luke, a light returned to the younger sibling's eyes. He stood confused for a few seconds until exactly what was happening sunk in. "Asch! What are you-"

"I'm helping you, you idiot," Asch said but there wasn't any trace of resentment in his voice.

"But Asch you can't!" Luke argued. "If we both disappear then there won't be anyone to free Lorelei!"

"Then I guess that doesn't leave us much choice," Asch shot back. "We'd better not disappear."

"No Asch, don't!"

"Damn it all Luke, if this is the last thing we ever do, we are going to do it together!"

"Asch..."

Asch shot Luke a reassuring grin.
All he could ask was to see them smile one last time... Luke smiled back.

"Thank you..."

Tear watched the swirling lights, the mass of Seventh Fonons as it exploded in intensity. What had been a steadily dying stream had suddenly become a roaring river. It was unlike anything she'd ever witnessed; unlike anything she'd ever witness again. Her view of Luke was completely obstructed by light, she'd no idea what was going on, what this sudden summation meant. Choking back the desire to be sick, every muscle in her body fell limp in Guy's arms. Whirring as the intensity grew, the hyperresonance shattered, flying at blinding speeds in every possible direction leaving a crisp blue sky behind it. As quickly as the reaction had cumulated, the entire thing was gone.

Was it possible for her to have forgotten, just how beautiful and endless the blue sky could be? The air still seemed to shimmer, glistening in the full light of the sun. Everything was so brilliant, so... full of colour. The world was suddenly vibrant and alive in ways that the melodist couldn't believe had escaped her memory. The scent of truly fresh air filled her lungs and her mind, actually clearing them for the first time in weeks. How easily she'd forgotten... but Luke hadn't. This was the world they'd fought for, the world they'd been prepared to die to protect... the world Luke had returned to them all.

Only a few of the replicas lingered; enveloped in a golden light as the last of their fonons slipped away they seemed content, though that may just be her own imagination trying to comfort the melodist. Had Luke been that happy? That content as he faded from the world?

Detracting her mind from her sudden inability to breathe, Tear mindlessly detached herself from Guy. What was the point? All the beauty in the world was meaningless without someone to share it with. A flash of red caught Tear's eye. Her heart skipped a beat.

"Luke!"

"Asch!" Natalia followed less than a split second later.

"Luke, no, please don't." Tear began pulling him up into her lap. She couldn't, she couldn't watch him vanish in front of her eyes, not like the other replicas had. She'd lost so many people in her short life... she couldn't lose him too! Her arms wrapped tightly around him, she buried her face in his hair.

"Really now, Tear," Jade spoke up. "He managed to survive all that, you needn't strangle him now."

Survive? Luke was alive? Tear sprung to life, suddenly noticing the presence of a strong pulse, one that had been drowned out by the roaring of her own heart. She could feel her face redden. She opened her mouth to protest but nothing came from it.

"That isn't like you to miss something so obvious," Jade added a bit too slyly. One look up told the melodist he echoed what had just run through each and every one of her friend's minds.

Tear's face was practically purple with embarrassment. Was- was it really that obvious? Did everyone see that she cared for Luke except herself? Oh Yulia, what had they said to Luke? How much did he know? Anise let out an evil snicker that told Tear this wouldn't be the last she heard on the matter, but in spite of her embarrassment she couldn't quite bring herself to dread that moment in the future... because Luke would be there. That was all her mind was capable of
processing. Luke was alive.

"Please remember," Mary's voice drew the attention of the group. "Please remember your promise. The remaining replicas will all have a place to live."

"We promise," Guy replied. "On my life, I swear the remaining replicas will all be cared for. In memory of you and your brethren who died today."

"Yes, for all of you who gave us this world," Natalia agreed. "We will honour your sacrifice."

Mary smiled, and Guy felt a pang of nostalgia, of loss and regret as she too, disappeared into the sparkling sky.

"Ugh..." Asch was the first to wake. Bringing a hand to his head, he groaned in pain before trying to sit up. Natalia caught him when he lost his balance but within a minute he was supporting himself. Not quite as delicate with his sibling as the others, Asch shuffled his weight and kicked Luke in the shin.

The fact that Luke didn't jump in pain was a testament to the fact that he was in the same amount of pain that Asch was, probably more, actually, since Asch had only jumped in at the end. Luke had forced himself through the entire thing. Luke began to move, and though it was a much slower process, he was eventually sitting up. Asch wanted to applaud him; he thought he ached all over. The hints from across their connection told Asch he wasn't in near the pain Luke was.

No one said a word as Luke and Asch remained locked in a stare-down. Neither said a word, but neither dared look away either. It seemed like forever; it seemed like only a moment.

"Asch, I'm-"

Luke was cut off when Asch pulled him in close and despite both their aching limbs, Asch held Luke tightly. This was really happening... Luke was really still alive. Asch held on tight, because he was afraid if he'd let go, Luke really would vanish. He would wake up to find himself scared and alone in a reality where Luke had disappeared.

"A-Asch... that... hurts..."

"You moron!" Asch protested, holding on all the tighter.


"He's not going to be if you don't stop suffocating him," Anise jibbed. "We just finished going through this with Tear!"

"Tear?" Luke looked curiously at the melodist who immediately averted her gaze. Her cheeks were still flushed from earlier and Anise was not helping.

"All joking aside," Jade said. "Both of you just placed yourself under an extreme amount of stress. I want you both to get a proper check up when you get back to Baticul."

"No way," Asch argued. "A little sore, yes, but we're fine. See," Asch swung his arm around, ignoring the large protest from his aching muscles. "We're fine. Nothing's broken that a good long nap won't fix."

"Yeah," Luke agreed, though his voice was more than enough to tell he was lying. He sounded completely drained, as if he hadn't slept for a month. "I'm a little sore and my head hurts a bit but
I'll be fine after getting some sleep."

"I'm afraid I'm going to be insistent on the matter."

"And I'm afraid that you're wrong," Asch stood up, putting every ounce of concentration into not letting his balance falter and prove Jade right. His legs each shot up twice the pain his arm had just mustered, but Asch was nothing if not stubborn. Smug at his victory, Asch remained planted to the spot. "You can't force us to see a doctor, if Luke wants to go, he can, but I am not."

The displeasure in Jade's eyes was far from being hidden and the Colonel was honestly surprised to see either of them even capable of protesting. It was plain as day that they were worn beyond measure and their feeble struggle to hide it was fooling no one but themselves. Even their attempts at sounding insistent were dulled by weariness and a tone that could only be produced by a significant amount of physical pain.

"I think I'll be fine too," Luke said, braving the Colonel's displeasure. Unlike Asch, however, he readily accepted Guy's help to get back on his feet. As he stood up, everyone heard a clink, like the sound of glass hitting the stone floor without breaking.

"What on..." Luke picked up the source of the sound, staring at the object in disbelief. It was perfectly round and had a purple hue to it. The symbol of the order of Lorelei sat suspended at the very center with clouds swirling around it, reflecting light at strange angles and giving the entire thing a powerful aura.

"The Jewel of Lorelei," Asch provided. Luke looked at his brother with about as much shock as he could muster. "You got it from Lorelei just fine," he said with a smile. "You just didn't know you had it." Retrieving the Sword, Asch held it up to the Jewel and the Sword began to emit a bright golden light.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Anise interrupted. "How could Luke not know he had it this whole time?"

"It's called the contamination effect," Asch said. "Lorelei broke down both the Sword and Jewel into fonons so he could send them up through the Absorption Gate."

"I still don't quite understand," Natalia commented. "Then how is it you have had the Sword this whole time, while Luke was unaware of the Jewel's presence? What is this contamination effect?"

"It's the same thing Jade uses with his spear," Asch pointed out.

"Yes, but not quite," Jade agreed. "You've one critical fact wrong."

"What's that?"

"In the case of my spear, it is broken down and the fonons are kept along the surface of my arm. It can be easily reconstituted because the fonons are vastly different than the fonons that compose my body. However, the Sword and Jewel were most likely broken down into Seventh Fonons which would get too easily lost in the massive amount of fonons that pass through the Absorption Gate. I believe that to ensure only you two would receive the pieces of the key, Lorelei sent the fonons through your fonslots."

"Is that even possible?" Guy asked.

"It's never been documented, no," Jade answered. "But there has never quite been a case like that of those three either."
"I still don't get what this has to do with Asch getting the Sword and Luke not getting the Jewel!" Anise stated in frustration.

"It's not that difficult of a concept," Jade continued. "In this case, the difference is in that Asch is a normal person, while Luke is a replica."

"Colonel!" Natalia immediately protested. "You're being rude to Luke!"

"My apologies," Jade adjusted his glasses. "However, in this situation it is a relevant difference. Perhaps the proper way of saying it is that Asch's body composition is that of a normal person. Asch was born like anyone else; his body is composed of various combinations of all seven fonons. As a replica, Luke's body is made up of exclusively Seventh Fonons, as they're the only ones stable enough to produce a living being. In Asch's case, the Seventh fonons that made up the Sword were immediately recognized as foreign and were separated from him where they re-assembled to form the Sword. For Luke, those Seventh Fonons blended in, if you will. It wasn't until the stress of his fonons dissipating that those fonons were able to escape and return to their original form."

"I guess I should give this to you then," Luke said, holding out the Jewel. Asch shook his head.

"No, you hold onto it for now. The God-Generals are getting more and more desperate to destroy the Key of Lorelei, its better if the two pieces stay as far from each other as possible. The longer we can go without them knowing we have the Jewel the better."

"I wonder," Luke pondered. "Jade, do you think you could teach me how to hide it like you hide your spear?"

"No," Jade replied. "Fonon manipulation at that level is extremely complex and dangerous. The last thing you need is more stress on your body."


Guy sighed. "You better teach him, Jade. If you don't, he's just going to try and figure it out for himself."

Luke grinned, his slyness dulled by the obvious fatigue on his face. He looked ready to fall over any second now.

"So now what?" Anise asked. "The miasma is finally gone and the world is in the clear for now."

"For now," Guy repeated. "It won't be for long if Van has his say in things."

"Then what's stopping us?" Asch asked. "We have the Key now, I think it's time to put an end to Van and his plans. We've done enough reacting. It's time for us to make our move."

"For our world," Natalia agreed.


"For a future for all of us."
The lights that flickered all throughout the Tower of Rem suddenly seemed so much brighter and all the more annoying because of it. Anise stood in the center of the elevator, watching the tower as it flew up around her marking the long-but-not-nearly-as-long-as-those-god-damn-stairs trip back down. It was the lack of the miasma, Anise concluded, that was making everything around her seem so different; but she knew that was only half the case. Sure the miasma was gone and it looked like a rainbow had thrown up on the world, but the real reason everything was so different, was because for the first time in longer than Anise could remember, everyone was happy.

She found the bright lights of the Tower's endless fon machines annoying, but she just couldn't find it in her to be upset. Anise was beyond exhausted, like she was sure everyone must be. That had been an emotional trial and she felt like she'd been wrung through the wash a few times, but at the same time she was just so relieved that everything had turned out that she couldn't help but be exuberant. No, the real reason she was annoyed was that she couldn't think of a really great line to throw at Tear right now, who still had her arm wrapped around Luke's. In consolation though, Luke's fidgeting was more than enough amusement and he was so nervous it was a miracle he was able to maintain a halfway decent conversation with Guy like he was. Anise just couldn't wipe the smile off her face. It was about freaking time Tear realized she was head over heels for him!

Honestly! Now if only Luke would clue in. Either way, she was glad to finally see them going somewhere. No one should have to end up like she and Ion had. Life is too short and fragile to let those chances pass you by. She'd learnt that the hard way.

Death seemed to have an amazing way of making you see things in a different light; Anise thought, letting her thoughts drift off with the whirring of the elevator as it continued downwards. She didn't blame Tear for being so scared up there; Anise had been too. They all had been. The tension, the terror, the way someone might as well have cut her heart out; Anise had no intension of ever going through anything like that again.

But... if there was one thing she would never forget, one single image that was going to haunt her dreams until she was some decrepit old lady in her bed, it was the sight of Asch in those moments. Weak, vulnerable... just broken; it was so different from the person she'd always known. The Asch she'd always watched had a better-than-everyone attitude and a cocky tone of voice that never stopped telling her what to do. This person she'd seen, the tiny glimpse of the human being that was Asch fon Fabre, shook her to her very core. Beneath that rough demeanour and god-awful temper, he was completely alone; as scared and abandoned as Luke had been, maybe even more so, because he didn't have an escape, an end to find comfort in.

No matter how back to normal things seemed now, with Asch trying to hide how tired he was, chatting with everyone like nothing had happened; Anise still could shake that image, that realization out of her head. Asch only had Luke in the world, didn't he? His mom was sick, unconscious and may never wake up; he didn't get along with his dad. He had spent the last few months just pushing everyone away, and something told Anise he didn't have any other friends. He had Natalia, sure, but it didn't take a genius to see the distance between them. Even as far back as their reunion after the Absorption Gate, Anise could sense an unspoken tension between them, and that had done nothing but grow and fester since. Asch had almost died alongside Luke up there, but it wasn't like they were tied at the hip like Luke and Tear were. In fact, Natalia was standing clear across from him, about as far as she could get without being obvious about it.

Anise tried to see around it... but every time she looked at Asch now, he just seemed so lonely.
It was what he deserved though, wasn't it? Anise knew she'd believed that at one point, maybe even wished for it. Listened to his crap one too many times and thought that if everyone just abandoned him, it would serve him right. He'd done it on purpose! He'd pushed them all away... but even Anise wasn't thick enough to be able to mistake his intentions. He always thought he'd bring them trouble, that he would put them in danger, so he thought it was safer to stay away. But wasn't that what friends were for? They're here to deal with all that crap together! So no one would end up hurt and scared and alone...

A wave of guilt came over Anise and she knew damn well she was part of the problem. She had always just preferred not to deal with Asch... because she didn't know how to handle him. He was impossible to talk to; he never asked or wanted anyone to help him. She'd tried to get to know him once; when they'd first met, it hadn't been like it was now at all. She'd attempted to get closer, but she found herself pounding against this impenetrable brick wall he'd put up around himself and had just given up on ever getting through. Then somewhere along the way, she had just stopped trying. So she avoided him instead. But that wasn't going to keep up! Things were going to change and Asch needed some serious re-educating. If she had to drag Luke into this to do it, then so be it!

The elevator lurched to a stop and Anise stepped out of the glass enclosure. Taking a look up, the former Fon Master Guardian's breath was taken away. Without the miasma, you could almost see the entire way to the top. The spiralling stairs became all the more dizzying, but it was the Tower's majesty that made her head spin.

"I can't believe we climbed all those," Anise muttered.

"A feat to be proud of," Jade added teasingly.

"And one I can't brag about," Luke joked, trying to make light of the situation as five pairs of displeased eyes suddenly fell on him. Well, four, Tear probably couldn't be mad at Luke if he'd drop kicked Mieu from the Tower roof right now.

Stepping out of the Tower, the first thing Ginji noticed was the heat. Not a muggy, stifling heat, but the crisp and clean warmth of the sun on his face. Looking up to the sky, bluer than the pilot had ever seen it, a feeling of peace came over him. They had their world back; that was all he could think. There were no words for how it felt to be robbed of the blue skies and endless horizons that the pilot lived for, and to finally have them back... there couldn't be any greater feeling. For the first time since talking to Luke in Baticul, since agreeing to lie to the person he considered his best friend; Ginji felt like he'd done the right thing. He didn't doubt that if Asch had been here alone, he would have died; now he had all his friends, and there wasn't a cloud to be seen. Ginji smiled; he couldn't wait until sunset.

The second Albiore came into sight first; not surprisingly, since the pilot had been extra careful to land behind the Tower where neither Noelle nor any of her passengers would see him. It was a bit further than he liked, but going unnoticed had been top priority at the time. Really it wasn't like the extra ten minutes now made any difference. He did have one piece of unattended business though, and the young pilot could not have predicted the words any better had he said them himself.

"Ginji!" Noelle's red piloting jacket stood out painfully well against the grass as she stormed right for her older brother. "What got into you? You're always acting so rash and without thinking! How dare you lie to me about everything! You said you were still in Sheridan!"

"Sorry Noelle," Ginji replied, though there was clearly no remorse in his voice.

"I think someone might be rubbing off on him," Anise said slyly, elbowing Asch in the side.
"What?" both Asch and Ginji asked in unison; everyone broke out laughing.

A startled squawk interrupted the laughter and made the female pilot jump half a foot in the air. Cringing, Noelle failed at inconspicuously putting some distance between herself and the Albiore II, under which sat a suspiciously familiar pile of crimson feathers.

"Is that who I think it is?" Anise muttered sceptically, trying to keep her displeasure to a minimum.

"I'd say, you're likely correct in your assumption," Jade agreed, adjusting his glasses.

"Ummmm," Noelle began hesitantly, noticing that everyone's eyes were darting between the monster sitting under the Albiore and her not so subtle retreat. "I don't know what the matter with it is, I tried to scare him off but he just wouldn't go and well..."

"You don't have to be scared of him," Guy said. "He's pretty much Asch's. I'd be careful trying to pet him though, he definitely has favourites."

"I-I think I'll pass," Noelle stuttered.

"Don't mind her," Ginji stated. "She doesn't handle birds well."

"Scared of them?" Anise asked.

"No!" Noelle answered way too fast for anyone to consider believing her.

Ginji laughed, "She's always scared to hit them when she's flying."

"Really? Birds?" Natalia asked questioningly.

Noelle glanced around, her cheeks reddening in embarrassment at they all chuckled under their breath, trying to hide their amusement for the sake of not insulting her.

"I am not afraid of birds!" Noelle protested running over to Guy and grabbing his hands as she stared him straight in the eye. "You believe me, don't you, Guy?"

"Ummmm, well..." Guy began. Everyone held their breath; Anise was just waiting for the inevitable realization as to exactly what was holding his hand. "I guess it makes sense to worry about hitting birds when flying, it's not like you can really dodge them that easily."

"Hey!" Anise cut in. "Guy, she's holding your hand! You're not freaking out."

"Huh?" both blonds looked down at their hands, as if just noticing they were interlocked.

"Come to think of it, you held Tear all that time without even flinching," Natalia commented. "I wonder if you haven't finally gotten over that phobia of yours."

Guy stood, his hands still in Noelle's, and he couldn't take his eyes off. He was holding Noelle's hand, a girl was holding onto him... but for the first time in his life, his entire body wasn't screaming to get out. Even thinking back to when he was holding Tear, there was no revulsion, no chill flying down his spine... nothing. "Maybe you're right," he finally answered.

"Well there's one way to find out for sure," Anise said with an evil grin on her face. Taking a running start, she leapt through the air, landing cleanly on Guy's back in the biggest bear hug she'd ever dared give him. Guy stumbled forward nearly knocking Noelle over as he absorbed the impact of the dark haired girl's tackle.
"Ouch, Anise..." Guy muttered.

"Awww boooo," Anise pouted. "You didn't so much as jump!" Guy chuckled weakly.

"Okay guys, enough," Asch chuckled shaking his head. "You're going to throw him right back at square one at this rate."

"But this isn't any fun at all!" Anise protested as she reluctantly released her prey. "Who's going to be fun to play with if he doesn't freak out anymore?"

"I'm sure an alternative form of amusement can be arranged," Jade suggested in that dangerous tone of his.

"Nuh uh, no way! I don't want anything you've had a hand in arranging!" Anise violently protested.

"Why Asch's little pet could be plenty of fun to play with," Jade continued.

"Oh sure, it would love to play with my dismembered arm!"

"Come to think of it," Natalia commented. "What is he doing here?"

"I haven't..." Noelle trailed off.

"She didn't get close enough to find out," Ginji interpreted.

"Ginji!" At Noelle's voice, the pile of feathers squawked again and lazily poked its head up. The blonde pilot darted behind Guy.

"Relax Noelle," Asch said with a chuckle, approaching the creature. Seeing him approach, the bird stood up and ruffled his feathers before indulgently allowing Asch to stroke his neck.

"Yeah, just don't try any of that crap Asch is doing right now," Anise added in a hushed voice so neither Asch or the big red feathered bag of temper would hear her. "It'll bite your hand right off. It only like people as temperamental as it is."

"We heard that," Asch said, without even turning his head. The crimson bird squawked in agreement. "What are you doing here?" Asch asked. The large red bird reached down and started picking at what looked like a black cord tied around his neck.

"What is it?" Luke asked, being the only one brave enough to approach his brother's so-called "pet". He didn't mind the bird Asch had appropriately named Fleric, but maybe its tolerance of him extended only to his similarity to Asch. Either way, Luke ruffled the bird's feathers while Asch worked on untying the string and Fleric chirped affectionately back. As tired as he was, the repetitive motion was almost entrancing. Luke shook his head and put all his focus into staying awake and at least somewhat alert.

"It's a message," Asch finally declared. A small leather pouch was attached to the black string he'd just removed from Fleric's neck. Opening it, he removed a single piece of paper with a familiar black scrawl on it.

"I guess that explains why they sent him," Guy replied, pointing a thumb at the monster contentedly accepting Luke's stroking. "He's always been able to find you before."

"Yes, but what could be so urgent that they absolutely had to contact Asch as soon as possible?" Tear asked.
"What does it say, Asch?" Natalia inquired worriedly. Her heart sank as she saw Asch's face lose what few shades of colour it had.

"Nothing specific," Asch replied. "It just says that Natalia and I are to return to Baticul as soon as we get this message and that it's incredibly urgent."

"Mother!" Luke's hands flew up to cover his mouth, earning him a displeased nudge in the side from Fleric who didn't appreciate his sudden flurry of movement.

"No," Asch immediately interjected. "If something had happened to her, they would have asked for you too. If they only summoned Natalia and I, then it must have to do with the court."

"You don't think… something happened to Father, do you?" Natalia asked, her voice unsteady. Anyone watching her could see her mind as it raced through the possibilities each more terrifying than the last.

"We have no way of knowing that," Asch answered, his strong tone comforting and undoubtedly sounding more confident than he felt. "Don't invite more trouble than there is, we won't know anything for sure until we get back and find out, okay?"

"Yes... you're right," Natalia agreed, but she didn't sound anywhere near convinced.

"We should head straight there," Guy stated. "We don't have any other plans at this point, and we should report to his Highness about the miasma anyways."

"Good idea," Tear agreed. "Whatever we do, we should get going so these two can get some rest."

"Huh?" Luke looked up.

"Exactly, Luke," Guy said, only earning him a confused look. "You are ready to pass out on your feet, you need some rest after all that."

"Yeah… I guess you're right," the younger Fabre replied, failing to suppress a yawn. He was too tired to even resist as Tear pushed him up the stairs onto the Albiore.

"To Baticul then?" Ginji asked.

"To Baticul," Asch confirmed.

"Okay, I have a couple last things to tie up, but I'll meet you there."

"Sounds good, oh and Ginji?"

The silver haired pilot stopped and turned around.

"Thanks," Asch said with a smile.

Ginji returned the gesture. "No problem," he said. "That's what friends are for. I'll see you in Baticul!"

"That's pretty convenient," Guy commented watching Ginji jog off. He could have laughed at the sudden bounce in Ginji's step had it not been in all of them.

"What is?" Asch asked.

"We're headed to Baticul, you and Luke can get looked at by the doctor while you're there."
"Did Jade put you up to that?" Asch eyed his former attendant sceptically. Fleric squawked in agreement.

"No," The blond said defensively, watching Asch turn to his pet. "In all due seriousness, I'm worried about you both. It isn't that we don't believe that you're fine, it would just give us all some peace of mind if you'd just get an okay from the doctor."

"You can find your way back home, can't you?" Asch asked his bird, completely ignoring Guy's comment. Fleric chirped and beat his wings. "Okay then, you head off and we'll join you there." The bird grabbed Asch's coat in its beak; Asch laughed. "No I can't ride home with you. I have to go with the others." Clucking in disappointment, Fleric took off into the sky.

"If this is about-"

"It is not about that!" Asch cut Guy off defensively. "You can say it until you're blue in the face but it's not going to happen. I'm not going to a doctor," the redhead declared, following his friends into the Albiore.

"You say that… but you know it will."

"Dream on, Guy. Dream on…"

Natalia quietly closed the door to her cabin, cringing when the hollow metal reverberated and echoed in the silent passage way. A quick peak back in the room told the young princess that she hadn't woken Tear, however, and she let out a sigh of relief. Her dearest friend had been up well into the night enjoying Luke's presence, as were they all. Somehow though, Natalia suspected the two had stayed up long after everyone else had turned in for the night.

How long Noelle had already been awake this morning, Natalia had no idea, but they'd already been up in the air when she'd woken earlier. Strange, as the engines normally did quite a good job of waking her promptly each morning. It was a testament to how worn everyone truly was. It would take many a good night's sleep to see them remotely resembling normal again. Then again, the prospect of being home in Baticul for even a few days offered the promise of some respite, once she was able to sort out the reason for their sudden summoning. Natalia was trying her utmost not to think on the matter; Asch had been entirely right in saying that it was best not to invite trouble. Somehow trouble had an excellent ability to find them regardless, and her worrying was going to do nothing but give her an ulcer one of these days.

Their impending return to Baticul did leave one other issue at the forefront of her thoughts however, and it was time that she did something about it. Even if just the thought was enough to make her sick; Natalia knew it had to be addressed, as things were, it wasn't fair to either of them.

Summoning all her willpower to keep her hand steady, Natalia knocked gently on the metal door. The first door to the left; Luke and Asch's room. At first she was scared she'd woken them, but the mumbles she heard from the other side re-assured her, if not surprised her, that they were both awake and already discussing something or another. Luke ought to be as exhausted as Tear, but then again he did sleep the rest of the afternoon away the previous day. He still looked tired, she thought, as her cousin opened the door, smiling warmly when he saw her.

"I do hope I'm not intruding on anything," Natalia said. Silly of her, after all that had happened they would obviously want some time to themselves. "I can come back later."

"No, not at all," Luke said with far more energy than he looked like he was capable of possessing.
"I was just heading up front. I think I heard Guy get up, and I wanted to ask him something anyways."

"Certainly." Natalia stepped out of the way to let Luke pass and the sly smile on his face told her he knew *exactly* why she was here and that he had absolutely nothing to ask his best friend. Though she wasn't sure if she was glad for his absence or not, she made a mental note to thank him later.

Natalia stepped in the small room and closed the door behind her. It was identical to her own room save for the corner where Luke and Asch's swords sat in place of her bow and Tear's staff. The tiny spaces were built for no more than sleeping and there was hardly any room to move around. Asch was sitting on the lower bunk, following her movements with his eyes. He didn't say anything, and Natalia shuffled uncomfortably. He certainly didn't appear angry with her, but with the relief and joy he must be feeling knowing Luke was alive, she doubted he'd given her actions much thought. It was only a matter of time.

"So..." Natalia hesitantly broke the silence. "What were you and Luke discussing?"

"Nothing, really."

Natalia berated herself; of course he didn't want to be sharing such things with her. Especially when she... Natalia's eyes met Asch's and despite all her previous assessments of his mood, she was surprised to find his eyes warm and inviting. He just wanted to know what she wanted to say, there was no harshness, no judgement there.

Somehow that made her task all the more impossible.

"What's the matter, Natalia?" Asch finally asked, noticing how upset she seemed. "What's wrong?"

"E-Everything," Natalia managed to reply. "I'm what's wrong. I've been so awful to you, and such a terrible fiancée. This is the fourth time now that I've let you down when you needed my support more than anything. I sat there and watched you fall, and the worst part is that I thought you might actually deserve it..." Natalia forced her hand to remain steady as she fought the tears that burned in her eyes.

"Natalia-"

"I feel horrid, absolutely terrible about it," Natalia cut him off. "I'm disgusted with how I treated you, and how I abandoned you and I wouldn't blame you if you chose to hate me. There aren't words to begin to tell you how sorry I am; because I know those sorts of sentiments are not nearly enough. I know I could never make it up to you, for betraying you like this. I've given it a lot of thought and... and I can't help but wonder if it's time we put an end to this."

"E- End this? Natalia what are you talking about?" Asch's eyes were wide with shock; full of confusion and dread, unable to quite understand what Natalia was even suggesting.

"In the 18 years we've been together, you've never let me down, not once," Natalia stated. "Yet that's all I've ever done to you. Be it when Luke first arrived, when you were trying to save the Outer Lands, when you'd fled Baticul to protect us or just now when you tried to save us all by eliminating the miasma... you needed my support and I let you down. I worked against you, I attacked you and I tried my hardest to hurt you, just because you were trying to protect us! Trying to protect our country... trying to protect me..."

Natalia's tears flowed freely now, and all the determination in the world couldn't quell her
trembling frame. "All I ever do is leave you to fall when I should be the one person in the world who would support you no matter what! I should be the one there to catch you, and yet I'm the one knocking you down. Y- You deserve someone better than me, someone who will be there for you regardless of the circumstances. That's why... I think it's time we part ways. You deserve better!"

"Natalia! How could you even think I would want something like that?" Asch was on his feet, his entire demeanour ablaze with a fire Natalia had long since missed in him; a passion that she admired, but knew she'd a hand in quelling over these past months.

"I'm not blind, Asch!" Natalia retorted, not even realizing she'd raised her voice. "I can see the distance between us... I can see how far apart we are. We never talk anymore... I never have any idea what you're thinking or how you're feeling. And I don't just blame you, I'm just as much at fault for not even being bothered enough to ask. Asch... we're barely friends anymore. If we keep this up, there isn't going to be anything left between us at all."

"No, you're wrong." Asch pulled Natalia close and she let herself collapse into the strength of his embrace. "It is my fault," he continued, his voice a whisper in her ear. Natalia could feel his pain in every muscle of his body. "I fought so hard to push you and everyone away, but I look at you now and I don't have any idea how to get you back." Asch paused and Natalia could feel him trying to gather himself. "I don't blame you for what you did," he finally said, "you were right not to support me. You were right not to let me go charging in on a blind desire to destroy myself. Because the truth is... I may have just been looking for a reason."

"Asch..." Natalia felt something inside her shatter at those words, at the painful truth in what Asch had just confessed to her and she felt that pain as real as a dagger through her heart. "I'm sorry!" She sobbed into his shoulder, holding him as tightly as her weakened arm would allow. "I'm so sorry!"

"I won't stop you if you want to leave," Asch continued. "If you don't want to be with me, then you can go. But know that I have, and always will, love you."

"Asch!" Natalia's crying renewed, but with each sob, she could feel a small piece of her heart fall back into place. "I do, I do want to stay with you. I want to stay by your side forever if you'll let me."

Asch held her tightly, and let her find comfort in his arms.

"It's alright," he whispered, rocking her gently. "It's time to fix things." Natalia looked up at him, her eyes red and still wet, but he smiled gently back.

"And this time we'll do things right."

The return trip to Baticul took an extra couple days as Jade very firmly insisted that both Luke and Asch got a decent amount of rest. When Asch put his foot down saying he refused to go to bed before they'd even touched down for the night, the Colonel countered and had them out of the air well before supper time. So while Asch was rather disgruntled at being defeated, no one could quite find it in them to really mind. Though the scenery wasn't quite as green and lush as it once had been, there was no doubt that the flora would eventually recover and that life, both animal and monster would soon regain its vitality. It was like rediscovering a world they'd forgotten.

Even Baticul, the city Luke had always considered dreary compared to the other places he'd visited, was alive with colours and festivities. The citizens were celebrating the disappearance of the miasma and even Luke couldn't recall a time when the city had been so alive and joyous.
People sang and played instruments in the plaza; the clean wind tossing coloured banners about as couples twirled with varying degrees of grace beneath them. Luke spotted the circus tent, front and center in the celebrations. Noir looked up from the child to whom she'd just offered a balloon and sent Luke a playful wink. Luke returned the smile, glad that his arrangements for her made the effort she'd taken for him worthwhile. He couldn't help but laugh as he caught a glimpse of York ordering Ginji around; it appeared they'd roped their ride into helping with the set up and Luke had to make a mental note to apologize to the pilot later.

The ride up the lift to the castle only showed more festivities on every level of the city. Everyone was so lively and so joyful, and Luke couldn't help but be happy too. Even with the weight of their urgent summons, the young noble felt his spirit soaring like it hadn't in a very long time. He was alive, Asch was alive, the world was safe for now... being free of such heavy burdens was more than enough to make Luke wish he was dancing in the streets with everyone else.

But Luke knew better than anyone that now wasn't the time for that. As wonderful as things seemed on the surface, they were that much uglier when you looked with any depth. Master Van was still working, and the fact they hadn't heard word or whisper of his actions lately left Luke uneasy. There had been Cantabile, but Luke got the feeling she'd acted on her own. He'd heard of the encounter with Legretta in the Tower of Rem, but otherwise they'd done nothing to interfere, nothing to ensure that the miasma they needed to destroy the originals wasn't eliminated. There was no way Master Van was just sitting around on Eldrant doing nothing, and if he was really counting on the miasma, there was no way things would have gone as smoothly as they had. That thought alone sent a chill up Luke's spine. To think of what he might have planned in place of the miasma was enough to give Luke nightmares.

The very top level of Baticul's majestic heights was the only one to remain free of the joyous chaos that had consumed the rest of the city. Actually, it was starkly empty and unusually quiet, so much so that Luke was a bit uneasy. What was going up here?

"What do you think?" Guy asked Asch.

"We should stop by the manor and see if Father has heard anything as to why we were sent for. It might be nice to know what we're diving into before we dive into it."

"I concur," Natalia replied.

"Master Asch, Master Luke," the White Knights standing at the gate extended their spears, blocking the entrance to the manor.

"What is it?" Asch asked, annoyed at being kept out of his own house.

"His Excellence has requested that when you arrive you present immediately to the palace," one of the guards replied.

"Is Father at the castle?" Luke inquired.

"Most likely, yes." The second guard replied.

"I guess we'd best go see him there then," Natalia stated.

"Yeah..." Asch trailed off. "Something isn't right about all this." He glanced around as they made their way next door to the castle. The two guards nodded, acknowledging the return of the Princess but otherwise said nothing. Asch just couldn't shake the sinking feeling... something was off and he couldn't put his finger on it.
"It's too empty." Anise said.

"What do you mean?" Guy inquired.

"Well every time we come here there's at least a few other people hanging around. It's never been a high traffic area but there's still the odd person about. We're the only ones here!"

"You're right," Tear looked about, but there was no other presence to be seen save the two sets of guards standing by their respective gates. "I wonder if it's closed off to the citizens?"

"Maybe," Luke replied. "But they almost never do that. Only when the Castle is completely off limits. Even during the war they didn't shut down the upper levels."

Passing through the giant doors into the entryway, Luke didn't have long to ponder the reasons for the strange restrictions as a familiar figure made straight for them.

"Asch! Luke!" Duke Fabre called, his commanding voice echoing throughout the vaulted chamber. "You're both--" He couldn't bring himself to finish his sentence, or consider the outcome it had implied but he did something that no one had seen him do for almost sixteen years. He held his eldest son in his arms.

"F-Father?" Asch was so completely caught off guard by the wave of relief he could sense from the man he'd always resented that he simply stood there in shock.

"I was worried when the miasma vanished that I might never see you again."

"Father..." Asch wasn't able to formulate a reply.

Letting Asch go, Duke Fabre took a step back. "I'm glad to see you return home."

"Thank you, Father."


Luke smiled, "Thanks."

"Uncle," Natalia finally dared to interrupt.

"What is it, child?"

"Do you know why it was we were so urgently summoned? I imagine you must have some idea as the messenger was yours."

"Ah good, he found you then. The Stable Master suggested I have that... creature," Duke Fabre finally settled on a term, "deliver the message as it was the most likely to be able to track down your location."

"We got the message just fine," Asch provided. "But what was it about?"

"I apologize for not including more details but we've been trying to keep things contained," the man explained. "I'm sure you've noticed the restrictions on the upper levels. No one is being allowed to visit the castle; we don't want to have any unnecessary commotion. You see, a few days ago, Ingobert had a heart attack."

Natalia's gasp turned everyone's heads and she didn't look very steady on her feet. Her entire face drained of colour as they watched, turning from a healthy glow to as white as the marble pillars.
"Relax child," Duke Fabre stated, noticing her panic. "He's fine now, albeit rather irritated at being confined to his bed for the past several days. It's on the doctor's orders but he's still not pleased. Unfortunately court affairs have greatly suffered as a result."

"I-I'm sorry," Natalia interrupted, her voice as weak as she suddenly looked. "May I...?"

"Of course," he replied, not even needing to hear her question. "Go see your father; we'll see that you're filled in later."

"Thank you," Natalia managed as she hurried off.

"Poor thing," Guy commented once she'd vanished from sight. "She's been on quite the roller coaster lately."

"Yeah," Asch agreed. "It's just one thing after another. How do the doctors think he'll make out?"

"They suspect, as we all do, that he'll be fine. He won't be challenging anyone at the Coliseum but that's to be expected."

"That's good to hear," Asch answered; the hesitation in his voice belying the fact that he was starting to realize why he'd been summoned so urgently.

"Asch," Duke Fabre turned to face his oldest son. "The reason you were so urgently summoned is that the court wants you and Natalia to remain in Baticul and take over running affairs under Ingobert's supervision. Though he's expected to make a full recovery, Ingobert's health is not at its best anymore. It is less than 2 years now before you'll be expected to take the throne and we feel this is the time to start integrating the two of you more permanently."

"I..." Asch stood speechless, his fears coming to fruition standing before his father. He'd always known this day would come; it was far less than ideal to have the throne change hands in a day. It was a gradual process and he knew that coronation was more a formality. By the time it came about, the new ruler was already handling the responsibilities of the throne single-handedly. But knowing the day was coming, and to see it arrive were two completely different things.

His hesitation came as a surprise, even to him. Asch could see his father watching him, waiting for a reply, any kind of response, but the words froze in his throat. How could he explain himself? How could he begin to explain the complexity of the feelings brewing below the surface of his stunned expression? He wanted to eventually take the throne... to rule beside Natalia and to lead Kimlasca to an age of unprecedented prosperity. It had always been a dream of his... but not now. Not with things as they were, with Van still out there and so many ends left hanging! He... he wanted to see this journey through to its conclusion. He wanted to stay with his friends.

"You don't need to give an answer right away," Duke Fabre said, noting the internal conflict that was waging within his son's mind. "Talk it over with Natalia once she's seen her father and calmed down a bit. It's no small decision."

"Thank you," Asch replied almost meekly. His mind was very obviously elsewhere. "I'll give it some thought and speak to Natalia about it later."

"Yes, well why don't you give your friends a bit of a break? You did just undertake the elimination of the miasma; I don't doubt you're all exhausted. While they rest here at the castle, you ought to go see your mother. I'm sure she'd love a visit from you both."

"How is she doing?" Luke asked eagerly.
"She hasn't woken, but she's greatly improved. I'm certain that knowing you're both safe will only expedite her recovery."

"You guys go see her," Guy agreed. "We'll all chill out here for a bit and grab something to eat."

"Oh yeah!" Anise jumped in excitedly. "I hope they have some of that pasta we had last time, it was amazing!"

"You tell the cooks," Duke Fabre suggested. "I don't doubt they'll prepare anything you desire after what you've done for us all."

Anise's eyes gleamed with a mischievous light.

"You guys go while there's still food in the kitchen," Guy said with a chuckle.


"Don't come back too soon!" Anise called. "I want dessert too!"

Asch couldn't help but feel a little more relaxed sitting in the room with his mother and he could see why his father had suggested he come here. It was as much for his peace of mind as it was for hers. Even his brief trip back up to the castle earlier that afternoon had brought a pile of worries crashing back down on him and he was relieved to return to this small reprieve. The large double windows were propped open, leaving a crisp evening breeze to waft in alongside the songs of the birds that flittered about the trees. All the fon machines that had once made this room seem foreign and cluttered were all but gone. The mask his mother had once been forced to wear to keep her breathing had vanished, as had the machines that watched her heart beat. She simply lay peacefully in bed, were she only sleeping. She was on the mend, and with his little brother sitting across from him, Asch couldn't be more grateful to have his family intact.

"She looks like she's going to be okay," Luke broke the calming silence.

"Yeah," Asch agreed. "I'm glad; I've had enough scares to last me a lifetime."

"You and me both," Luke added and the two brothers chuckled in unison, only adding to the serenity of the atmosphere.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Always," Luke replied. "But I may or may not answer you."


"Pull what off?"

"Getting out of Belkend, beating us to the Tower... how did you do it?"

"You almost had me," Luke admitted. "Because you came up with the whole thing practically on the spot. I was hoping to catch a hint that you were planning something and figure out as much as I could to give Ginji and Noir a bit more direction. I'm lucky Noir is so creative; the elevator thing was all her."

"Noir and Ginji... who else was in on it?" Asch asked. He surprised himself with just how comfortably and casually that they were able to discuss the topic; like it had been an afternoon in
the city, not an massive incident during which they'd thrown more anger and hatred at each other than in the rest of their lives combined. Yet both of them were smiling and neither felt any pressure or resentment. All that friction, all that negativity had vanished with the replicas, dissipating into the endless blue sky. When it came down to it, when it was life or death, suddenly those petty things didn't matter anymore.

"Noir and Ginji," Luke confirmed. "I had Jade and Guy in on it too. Guy slipped Noir the key and she unlocked the door. Ginji was waiting not far out of town so I didn't have to head all the way down to the port either. Still, I was worried I might be too late. I really only made it to the roof less than an hour before you did."

"I can't believe you got Guy to agree to it. He was the one person I was sure wouldn't let you go through with it."

"I made him swear it on our friendship, because I knew he was the one you would turn to or confide in. I knew he was the one you figured would choose me over you."

"But I was wrong," Asch said, more to himself then to anyone. It surprised him... just how predictable he was, and how much he'd completely misunderstood the others.

"You were wrong."

"Asch..." Luke spoke up when silence had fallen over them. "I'm sor-"

"Don't apologize," Asch cut Luke off. "If anything I'm the one who should be apologizing to you. Not just for how I acted these past couple weeks or for locking you in a lab in Belkend but for everything. Since the Absorption Gate... I've just handled things wrong. I convinced myself that I was doing these things for the good of everyone else when really, I was just being selfish. It wasn't your feelings I was considering, it was my own."

Asch paused, feeling the truth of the words he'd spoken resonate within him. Saying them aloud just re-affirmed what he'd realized in these past few days since almost losing Luke. He was selfish. When he'd been up there, not thinking, reacting entirely on his emotions he hadn't screamed that he wanted Luke to live, he yelled that didn't want to be left alone. His panic wasn't for Luke's life, but over the pain he'd feel if Luke left him. Luke had been about to die, and he just didn't want to be lonely. His selfishness sickened him.

Yet, it was the same this whole damn time. He always did what he thought was best, what he decided was right. Never did he stop to think that Luke had just as much right to make his own choices. Luke had just as much right to decide to be the one up there eliminating the miasma; but Asch had refused to see that, because that would mean Asch had to deal with losing Luke. All his choices, his excuses of 'protecting them' were lies. He was only protecting himself and he hated it.

But that was going to change, and it was a change that was long overdue.

"I'm sorry Luke," Asch said, and for the first time he felt he truly understood why he was apologizing.

"I'm not going to tell you it's okay, because it's not," Luke replied. "You're right, you were being selfish..." Asch looked to the floor. Thinking it was one thing but hearing it from Luke was another.

"You were being selfish..." Luke continued, "But so was I. So no, it's not okay, but I'll forgive you anyway."
"Thank you Luke," Asch replied sincerely before a mischievous grin took its place. "I might even consider forgiving you too someday."

"Hey!" Luke protested but both of them erupted into a fit of laughter. It was a light and liberating feeling to let all that animosity go on the cool breeze that swept through the room. Completely unable to wipe the smile off his face, Luke finally felt like he had his big brother back.

"Is that what I think it is?" Asch asked. Luke hadn't even realized he was playing with his locket, and dropped it in surprise. The black cord around which it was suspended caught the pendant and it dangled harmlessly around his neck. Luke eyed the black cord, almost missing the chain on which it had once hung. But since the chain had broken on him, he'd settled for a substitute. At least he didn't have to fumble with that stupid clasp anymore. Slipping it over his head, Luke tossed his half of their locket to Asch.

"Wow that's such a long time ago," Asch smiled fondly looking at the aging picture. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out an identical golden pendant and held the two side by side.

"It really does seem like a long time ago," Luke agreed. "But it can't be more than two years now, can it?"

"Three," Asch corrected him. Either way though, Luke was right; his life before all this started, before that fateful day Tear and his little brother had vanished from the courtyard, seemed like a lifetime ago. So much had happened, so much had changed.

Asch missed those times though. Things had been simpler then; the boy whose picture sat in Luke's half of the locket had been so relaxed and free. Now everything was complicated and nothing came easily. Now he knew the meaning of burdens and sacrifice and he felt the weight of that knowledge each and every day.

Such a bright and genuine expression... he probably couldn't even smile like that anymore.

'Sure you can,' Luke offered softly. 'You just haven't tried in a long time.'

'I know, but it isn't as easy as it used to be.'

'That's just what you tell yourself,' Luke retorted. 'It's no easier or harder than it used to be. You just have more excuses now.'

Asch could only chuckle, deep down knowing just how right Luke was.

Luke let out a deep sigh. "So... what are you going to do about the court's request? Are you and Natalia going to stay here or are you going to come with us?"

"I honestly don't know," Asch admitted. "I was talking to Natalia a bit and she said that she will follow whatever I decide but... I just... I just don't know!"

"It's okay."

"Is it selfish of me? To want to come?"

"No, not at all. You've invested just as much, if not more, into this journey as anyone else. You have every right to want to see things through until the end."

"But the throne is partially my responsibility. It's both Natalia and my responsibility. I can't just completely abandon it, it's not that simple! None of this is that simple!"
"Sure it is." Luke replied simply. "Just decide. Decide and devote yourself to the path that you've chosen. That's really the only way to get anything worth having in this world. At least, that's what my big brother has always taught me," he added with a playful wink.

"Yeah well, your big brother is an idiot."

"Maybe, but once in awhile he gets things right."

"Few and far between," Asch shot as Luke stood up, making his way to the door.

"More often than he thinks," Luke countered with a smile before slipping quietly out of the room, leaving Asch with his thoughts.

Natalia paced pointlessly across her room. The moon hanging outside her window told her she should have been in bed hours ago but the nervous energy refused to quell and until it did she wouldn't be getting much sleep. She'd spent the entire day with her father, save for a brief conversation with Asch about what the court had been discussing on the matter. Her father seemed to be in decent spirits giving how little he enjoyed being confined to bed but Natalia knew even that wasn't enough. He was already pushing himself too much, too soon. It hadn't even been a week, he needed to rest and recover more before insisting on dealing with court matters from his chambers! Maybe Asch would have better luck talking some sense into him.

She was so glad that things were going well with Asch, and her conversation with him earlier that day had greatly helped to calm her nerves. She still worried for him though, and knew the choice ahead of him was a difficult one. Natalia felt bad for pushing the responsibility of the decision completely onto Asch, but she wanted to support him in whatever he wanted to do. She owed him that at the very least.

At least there was a choice. What would they have done if her father hadn't survived? What would they have done if he'd died? Asch was still too young, Duke Fabre would have had to take the throne in the interim but undoubtedly they would be heavily involved. Natalia's pacing doubled in speed and she stopped, forcing herself to take several long and deep breaths. There was no point in getting worked up over something that didn't happen, and she truly couldn't afford another night of fitful sleep as it was. She needed a distraction, something to clam her nerves before trying to go to bed.

Reaching into her pocket for a handkerchief, Natalia heard the clink of something hitting the floor. What was this? Natalia didn't remember having such a thing. Picking up what looked like a ball of dirt; Natalia identified it as the trinket she'd recovered from Choral Castle. Goodness! She'd completely forgotten about its existence. The incident with Mohs seemed so very long ago, she wasn't entirely surprised the pendant had lost itself in the depth of one of her pockets.

It was curious; she couldn't imagine to whom it belonged. Even covered in mud she could tell it was too big to belong to either of the boys. Besides, had either of them lost theirs, she'd have heard of it by now. Perhaps it had once been Aunt Susanne's; Choral Castle was once their vacation estate after all. That was a task she could perform to settle her racing mind. She could work on cleaning the dirt from this locket and return it to her Aunt for when she woke up.

Yes, that would be perfect. She'd get the locket cleaned up to calm herself down and then she could get a good night's sleep.

Ingobert stared out the window and knew he should consider going to sleep, but a second look at
the paperwork he'd very forcefully ordered be left at his bedside, beckoned him to continue. After all, it was only at the late hours he could get away with getting any work done. If he attempted it in the day, the doctors would have it removed and he'd spend the rest of the day trying to talk those old fogies into giving it back to him. Honestly, reading and signing appropriate documents was not a danger to his health. If this kept up, the stress of his confinement was going to give him another heart attack!

In retrospect, however, Ingobert knew he should have paid more attention to his health. The chest pains he'd been all too conveniently ignoring had crept up on him over the past few months, but with the chaos brought on by the replicas and the miasma, he just couldn't afford to stop. That remained unchanged, though the miasma was gone, arranging a living situation for the remaining replicas was still in its infancy and needed much work that he simply couldn't offer from his bed. Yes, he would be glad to be back on his feet.

A knock at the door startled the King and he hastened to put away the documents he'd been reading before a head of red hair slipped in the door.

"They let you in?" Ingobert inquired jokingly.

"They almost didn't," Asch answered. "They said you were asleep, I told them you definitely weren't. I won."

"Indeed," Ingobert chuckled, wishing he could have watched the showdown of wills between his nephew and his captors.

"So how are you doing?"

"I'd be fine without all this," Ingobert replied with a wave to indicate his surroundings. "Rather I think the one asking that should be me. How are you faring?"

"I'm fine, why would you need to ask that?"

"Judging by how evasive Natalia has been lately, I'm guessing the court has gone and done something stupid like ask you and Natalia to step in permanently."

"Yeah," Asch confirmed. "That sounds about right."

"I thought that might be what's been on both your minds these past couple days. So what do you want to do?"

"Do I really have a choice?" Asch asked, and though he was attempting to smile, he just looked defeated; worn from days of fighting with an impossible choice.

"Of course you have a choice," Ingobert replied. "Don't let them pressure you into doing something that you aren't ready for yet. That throne will not disappear if you don't claim it this exact second. If you feel it's time for you to step in, then I will invite you with open arms, but if not, we will wait until you are ready."

"I don't know..."

"Then I think that is your choice. I am fine. All trivial concerns aside, I will return to full health and be able to handle the court independently as I have before. Right now, you are involved in something much bigger than the internal affairs of this castle, and much bigger than even the happenings of Kimlasca."
"But this is my responsibility! I can't just toss it aside because I want to go with my friends."

"Asch, you cannot step in right now. Your heart isn't here; it is, and will remain with them until this is all over. No one can rule when their mind is elsewhere and their thoughts are so clouded with doubt and regret. For you to try and take on the ruling of this country half-heartedly would be an insult to the people of Kimlasca."

"Uncle..."

"Go with your friends Asch," Ingobert said. "Go secure a future in which you and Natalia can someday rule happily. We will wait as long as is necessary. Being a ruler doesn't mean you have to sacrifice everything for the sake of the throne. It just means that your dreams and the dreams of this country will coincide."

"Thank you," the young monarch stood up. "Thanks for everything."

"You're more than welcome," Ingobert replied, fighting with some of his excessive blankets.

"Try not to push it too much before I come back," Asch added with a smirk before slipping out the door.

"That might be difficult," Ingobert replied into the night. "It's getting harder and harder to live up to the feats these kids have been doing these days."

"Ow ow ow! Damn it Jade let go! That hurts!" Asch's overly strident protests could be heard from just about any given corner of the medical wing. "I am not going to see a doctor, I am fine! You're going to take my ear off old man, I'm not a baby! Let go!" Several people were staring at the source of the commotion but the Colonel had absolutely no intention of doing anything about it.

Jade had tried to play nice. He had given Asch multiple chances to come quietly, and given his charge fair warning as to what would happen if he continued to dismiss the Colonel's request, but alas, here they were. With an overly firm grip on Asch's left ear, the stubborn young monarch had no choice but to stumble along beside him as they made their way down the hall. Pain made such a wonderful motivator, and perhaps Asch wasn't a child, but so long as he continued to act like one about getting a check up, he would be treated accordingly.

"Luke, you traitor!" Asch shot at his sibling who was quietly walking by Jade's right side. Being slightly more co-operative than his brother, he'd agreed to come along without any fuss.

"It's not treachery," Luke replied teasingly, "It's survival instinct."

Asch muttered something inaudible but continued to struggle fruitlessly. Luke suspected it had become more a matter of stubborn pride than the fact that Asch really that adamant about not seeing a doctor. To get a check-up now would be conceding defeat and Asch had more issues with that then with the health care figures he mildly despised.

In all honesty, Luke was kind of glad Jade was making them go. Though he hadn't really said anything to anyone, something just hadn't felt right since leaving the Tower of Rem. At first he'd just dismissed it as being tired and worn out, but they'd been back in Baticul for over a week now. He was more than well rested, but something still felt... off. The strange tugging at the edges of his mind, the invisible force pulling his consciousness into a vast emptiness had never completely gone away. Though it wasn't the all consuming force it had been in that moment, not at all. It was incredibly weak, so weak Luke spent most of the time ignoring it, but it was still there... and in those quiet moments as he drifted off to sleep, he felt its presence pulling at him. Maybe it was just
his imagination, the lingering memory of that all too frightening moment where he'd almost vanished. Luke didn't know if a doctor could help, it wasn't like anything was physically wrong... but hearing that everything was fine would put his mind at ease.

"Asch, give it up," Guy said despairingly. "You're not getting out of this one and you're just bothering all the other patients."

"Shut up," Asch shot, and Anise stifled a mischievous giggle. What was with the audience anyway? Sure Luke was here since he was getting a check up too, but did everyone have to come? What was the point of Natalia, Anise, Guy and Tear being here too?

Before Asch could really contemplate how to get his companions to scatter to the winds without resorting to his usual tactic of... well, as Luke would put it, being an ass; they came to a stop before a set of identical doors. Asch knew the rooms, he couldn't count the number of times he and Luke had been dragged here by their mother in their youth. They had tried to use the adjoining rooms to play their switching trick, but the doctor always caught them. After all, only one of them was a replica and she could remember who should be in what room.

"Now," Jade said very firmly, almost throwing Asch through the left most door. The redhead stumbled a few steps before turning back with the most spitful look they'd seen on him in a long time. "The first one of you to exit those rooms before the doctor has confirmed with me that your check up is complete will die. Is that understood?"

"Yes," Luke replied, obediently entering the room on the right. Jade's ruby eyes passed to the older sibling standing in the door frame.

"I hate you," Asch seethed, slamming the door closed.

Anise burst into a fit of giggles, one that she'd hardly been able to contain on the walk here. "Of all the things-" she managed, trying to catch her breath. "Of all the things for Asch to be afraid of... doctors wasn't the first thing on my list." Anise started laughing again. She knew it was rude but it was just too damn funny! The great and fearless Asch couldn't handle a doctor.

"It really so hard to believe?" Guy asked.

"Why do you say that?" Anise asked, finally getting her laughter under control.

"Surely it's not that difficult to imagine," Natalia provided. "After the fomicry experiments he was put through as a child, it really isn't much wonder why he dislikes doctors."

"Would fomicry experiments have really been that bad?" Anise asked incredulously.

"It's very possible," Jade agreed. "Even today the process would be incredibly painful for the original, and Asch went through it almost eight years ago before many of the modern refinements existed."

"He would never speak of it, but before he was kidnapped he didn't have any aversion to doctors, and he certainly did when he returned."

"Oh," Anise shrunk a little. Suddenly she felt awful for laughing.

"Don't worry about it," Guy said. "We've all had a good laugh or two over the years, even Luke has. They pulled more than a few stunts trying to get around appointments," the blond chuckled. "The bottom line is, everyone is afraid of something; some of us have more valid reasons for those fears than others. As his friends it's our job not to help him avoid it, but to help him through it
when he has to face it."

"Well spoken, Guy," Natalia complimented the blond.

"Yeah, you're right," Anise chirped eagerly, letting her guilt slip away. "We'll be right here when he gets out!"

"We'll see how long that enthusiasm lasts," Guy muttered.

"Hey!"

"Indeed we will," Natalia concurred with a chuckle. "Indeed we will."

Luke pulled his jacket back up over his shoulder as he watched the doctor flip through several papers that held his test results. The silence in the room was almost unbearably and the pensive, almost grim look on his doctor's face was not helping the tension. Luke jumped up off the bed and stretched. He felt perfectly fine, so why did he have such a sinking feeling?

"I think it best you sit back down," his doctor stated, offering Luke one of the nearby chairs.


"The fonons that normally hold your cells together are declining rapidly. They're separating, and when they do, your cells will disintegrate."

"And?"

"And you will die."

Luke reeled at those four words, suddenly feeling like the entire world had come crashing down onto his chest. At first it didn't feel real, it wasn't him she was talking to. He was listening to a story, a story that belonged to some other person, not to him. It just couldn't be true; it couldn't be him. He'd made it through alive, he'd gotten rid of the miasma and he'd managed to survive! It just couldn't...

"Belkend has several advanced medical facilities," the doctor offered, placing her hand comfortingly over his. "If you check in there, they could very well extend your life, but regardless the end result will be the same. Someday you will disappear."

Luke's denial fell to pieces and from the look on the doctor's face, she knew exactly what thoughts were running through his head. Again and again that same realization repeated itself. He was going to die... after everything... he was still going to die.

"Do you know when? How long-" Luke faltered. "How long do I have?"

"I wish I could tell you. It's possible the fonon separation will slow down, but it may speed up as well. Much of it will depend on you and how much stress you put yourself under. I'm sorry I can't be of more help."

"No... no it's fine," Luke said, trying to offer a weak smile. "Just... can you please not tell the others?"

"The information between a doctor and her patient is strictly confidential," she replied. "It is between you and me and no one else."
"Even Asch?"

"Even Asch."

"How is Asch? Is he the same?"

"I'm sorry," she said with a sad smile. "Confidentiality works both ways. You'll have to ask him yourself. I'll go inform your friend that the two of you may leave when you're ready. I have no other patients today so you can sit here as long as you need to, alright?"

"Okay, thanks," Luke replied vaguely, and the doctor quietly left the room.

Luke sat alone for what seemed like an eternity, reality slowly penetrating through the instant wall of denial he'd tried to put up. He really was going to die, he was going to disappear from the world, lose his friends and family... Why? Luke buried his head in his hands. Why was he so bothered? He had prepared himself, he'd been ready to die up there, to sacrifice himself for the sake of eliminating miasma. Really he'd been given more time than he should have had, so why? Why did it hurt so much?

A knock at the door had Luke hastening to wipe the tears from his eyes. Looking up, Luke noticed it was the door to the adjoining room. A second knock, and Asch peeked his head in the room.

"Hey Asch," Luke greeted his sibling, proud of himself for how steady he kept his voice.

"Hey Luke," Asch replied, coming over to sit in the chair the doctor had vacated just moments earlier. "So what did the doctor say?"

"The doctor...? The doctor said I would be just fine!" Luke lied with as much enthusiasm he could muster. "She said my blood fonons were still kinda low but that I'd be back to normal in a few weeks."

Luke met Asch's eyes and he could see the pain in them, he could see the sorrow in every aspect of Asch's posture, the grief saturating his aura. Asch just smiled softly.

"I thought we'd said no more lies."

The all too fake smile on Luke face broke and he hung his head, as much to break from Asch's gaze as to try and hide the pain he knew was painted all over his expression. Luke knew the truth; he just didn't want to accept it. Asch knew he was lying. Asch knew he was lying because Asch had heard the exact same thing. The cause, the reason, the words used to convey the message; it was all irrelevant because the end was the same. They were both going to die, and nothing either of them could do was going to stop that.

A second knock came at the door and Luke'd barely time to recover and stand up before everyone came flying through the door.

"So! So!" Anise demanded eagerly. "What did the doctor say?"

"Are you going to be alright?" Tear asked.

"Not much," Asch replied. "She said Luke here has some brain damage, but that was always there. Otherwise we're both perfectly fine."

"That's wonderful to hear!" Natalia exclaimed and gave her fiancée a hug.
"Yeah," Guy agreed. "I know you've been saying you're feeling fine, but it's really great to know nothing's wrong."

"I told you so, old man," Asch shot.

"Perhaps we should have something special for dinner to celebrate," Natalia suggested. "I know of a recipe the chef would be delighted to cook and is really quite wonderful."

"Oh! That sounds awesome!" Anise jumped excitedly. "Does it have beef in it?"

"I'm afraid not," Natalia chuckled. "But I can have them prepare a strawberry shortcake for dessert."

"Alright! You guys coming or what?"

"We'll be right there," Luke called, watching Natalia, Tear, Anise and Guy disappear down the hallway. The setting sun cast a deep shadow along the otherwise empty corridor, and the silence in their absence seemed to reverberate from the walls.

"You're both terrible liars," Jade stated, breaking the silence. "Neither of you are fine, are you?"

"What makes you say that?" Luke asked.

"There you go again," the Colonel interrupted. "Didn't I teach you better?"

"I dare you to say something," Asch shot defensively.

"Relax," Jade said with a sigh. "I imagine your fonons must be undergoing rapid separation and disintegration."

"So what's your point old man?"

"My point is that I'm perfectly willing to go along with your little story, so long as you both promise me that you won't over do it."

"Hmph." Asch crossed his arms, upset that he had so quickly assumed Jade was going to be the tattle-tale. The last thing he wanted was to deal with how the others would look at him. He didn't want their pity, because each time he'd just be reminded that he was going to die. But he knew Jade better than that, and he was finding that he constantly under-estimated the old man. "So tell me exactly when we ever over do it?" Asch finally shot with the hint of a smirk.

"My apologies, allow me to reword that. I forbid you from continuing to overdo it. The more you use your power, the quicker the reaction will be, and the sooner you'll disappear."

"Fine fine," Asch waved his hand dismissively as he walked off in the same direction as the others; but Jade didn't miss the gratitude hidden in his vocal undertones. "I'll see what I can do."

Jade didn't move, nor did Luke who still stood beside him. In his peripheral vision he could see the younger noble shuffle, his eyes trained on the floor as his mind searched from something it couldn't find. Jade sighed.

"Luke, do you have something you want to say to me?"

"Why did you break your promise?" Luke asked. His voice not nearly so well adjusted as his siblings, betraying the internal mess that was his psyche at the moment. "You gave me your word you wouldn't let Asch get involved at the Tower of Rem! But you did, and look at where we are
now. Now Asch is going to die too! We're both going to disappear and Asch didn't have to! Asch shouldn't have to die too!"

So that's what this was about, Jade wondered why Luke suddenly seemed uncomfortable with him. It was a perceived sin that could be overlooked before when the boy thought all had turned out okay. All's well that ends well, as it were. But things had changed now, and the price they'd paid for their noble deeds was weighing heavily on them both.


"What? But you-"

"I gave you my word that I would see you through until the end," Jade cut Luke off. "Luke, that was not your end; not up there, and not now."

Silence fell over them both.

"Thanks... Jade."

The Colonel sighed as he watched Luke run off after his sibling. No it wasn't their end yet, and he had every intention of keeping his word. He would continue to see them both through to the end, wherever that end may lie.
Anise stared out the Albiore's window, watching the puffy white clouds in the distance, occasionally squinting her eyes and trying to make funny shapes out of them. She'd already spotted two that looked like the Colonel; but the once cotton-like balls drifting through the sky were steadily becoming stray wisps and that didn't make for much fun. Not that playing guess-the-shape with clouds could ever be classified as "fun", but she had already polished off all the books Natalia had brought with her and the former Fon Master Guardian was officially bored. Between the time they'd spent in Baticul and the fact that there was finally no one ready to murder someone else at a moment's notice, Anise had forgotten how painfully dry long trips could get. She just had to keep reminding herself it sure as hell was better than walking.

She wasn't the only one who could use something to do though. Guy looked about as excited as she was, but he seemed to be content watching the newest lovebirds in their conversation. Seriously, Luke and Tear were so into each other the Albiore could crash and they wouldn't notice. Anise shuddered at her own reference. While she could safely say she was pretty much over her fear of flying, she definitely still had a healthy respect for falling out of the sky.

Anise let her gaze drift from Luke and Tear to the other two lovebirds; not that you'd know it from the way Asch and Natalia were sitting. Both looked bored and while they'd been enjoying each other's company enough to make Anise suspect they'd settled their differences, they were both being unusually quiet. Come to think of it, they'd both been quiet since leaving Baticul. Maybe they felt bad for not staying behind to help? Though from what she'd heard the King had given them his blessing; he'd practically forced them to go. Oh well, Anise sighed; whatever was eating away at them, at least they had each other.

"So," Anise finally spoke up, her levels of boredom reaching a critical point. "Does someone want to remind me exactly why we're headed to Grand Chokmah?"

"Well, we're going to see Peony for starters," Natalia offered. "We said that we would report to him regarding the miasma on Father's behalf."

"Yes," Tear agreed. "Also, Eldrant is currently floating over Malkuth waters, so there's a chance we might be able to get information from him with regards to any activity going on up there while we've been busy worrying about the miasma."

"We need to know as much as we can," Luke said, his voice carrying an unusual bounce to it. "We have both halves of the Key of Lorelei now; it's time we put a stop to Master Van once and for all. We can't afford to do this carelessly; this is going to be our one and only chance."

Anise rolled her eyes. For crying out loud... despite how serious Luke's words were, the kid was practically on cloud nine. "What has you in such a good mood all of a sudden?" She asked.


"No reason, I guess," Anise replied shrugging it off but getting all the more suspicious that there was some sort of reason he was so cheery, other than the fact he and Tear had barely left each other's side since they left Baticul. She stole a glance over at Asch, but his neutral expression didn't offer any kind of clues. He really had been quiet lately... what was up? It was weird to have the two of them in such opposite states of mind. Anise chuckled; then again, maybe Luke had won a bet between them or something. That would definitely explain it.
"So, Jade," Guy began, unsure how much he really wanted to pull the Necromancer from his reading, "Did you learn anything interesting from those reports?"

Luke managed to distract himself from trying to figure out why Anise kept grinning at him like that, to notice that Jade had put a very significant dent in the stack of reports he'd collected during their brief stay over in St. Binah. Luke couldn't say he honestly minded the detour and since it was Jade that had asked, no one had seen any reason to protest. It really wasn't too far out of their way and Jade was right in assuming that since it was a military outpost, they'd have information on any military operations involving Eldrant. Luke was impressed that the General there had been able to put together as much as he had for Jade in just one night.

What Luke had really loved though, was seeing just how far the city had come in its repairs. Slowly but surely, it was starting to look like the city that had awed him the first time he'd set foot there. Falling into the Qliphoth had made a real mess of it, and at the time Luke had doubted it would ever recover, but now he could see how wrong he'd been. He'd underestimated the power of the citizens and they had done an incredible job restoring their city. To see things slowly returning to normal made him happier than he could begin to explain.

"Quite a few interesting things," Jade replied, finishing his scan of the page he'd been on before setting the report down on the empty seat beside him. "It seems the military has made more than a couple attempts to approach Eldrant but each time they encountered the same interference and were forced to withdraw."

"Interference?" Natalia inquired. "Was it the God-Generals?"

"Hardly," Jade replied, adjusting his glasses. "They may be skilled, but even the God-Generals would have a difficult time staving off half the Malkuth navy. No they all describe encountering a sort of shield surrounding the island. Their ships couldn't even get close, and all attempts at long-range fire were deflected."

"What about approaching it by air?" Ginji called back from the cockpit. "Do you want to try landing there?"

"I don't think that would be wise," Jade answered. "The reports describe trying to approach the island like trying to pass through the Planet Storm itself. There is also every indication that the island is shielded from all sides, not just against the approach of ships. The Albiore is sturdily built, but I doubt even it could survive turbulence of that intensity."

"Is it even possible for Van to be using the Planet Storm as a shield?" Asch asked.

"I'm not entirely certain," he confessed. "But it isn't beyond the realm of possibility, especially given his in-depth knowledge of other Dawn Age technologies. He knew enough about the operation and peculiarities surrounding the passage rings; if it is possible to manipulate the Planet Storm to that extent, I don't doubt he would know how."

"Well that's just great!" Anise stated in exasperation. "If that's the case, just what are we supposed to do? It's not like we can go shut off the Planet Storm!"

"The Planet Storm is a major source of fonons," Tear agreed. "Without it there wouldn't be enough fonons to power fon machines or cast fonic artes. There would be no energy source for anyone in the world."

"Yeah but if it's that or letting Master Van destroy everything," Luke intervened. "We may not have much choice."
"Is it even possible to shut the Planet Storm off in the first place?" Natalia inquired.

"Well, according to the legend, the Planet Storm is powered by a massive glyph that Yulia carved at both the Absorption and Radiation Gates using the Sword of Lorelei," Tear explained.

"If the Sword was used to carve the glyphs, I wonder if the Jewel would have the power to disperse them," Luke speculated.

"It's a bit early to jump to conclusions," Jade cut them off. "As of yet, we don't have any conclusive evidence that the Planet Storm is even involved beyond the speculation of the navy's commanding officers."

"So what do you suggest?" Guy asked.

"Dist is currently being held in Grand Chokmah; I believe he may be the perfect person to... interrogate regarding the nature of Eldrant's shields and how to get around them," the Colonel said with a grin that could give them all nightmares, adjusting his glasses so they caught the light in that don't-even-think-of-crossing-me way of his.

"I don't know if I want to see that," Luke muttered with a shiver.

"What are you crazy?" Anise asked. "I do!"

Being in Grand Chokmah at the peak of winter was a strange experience for Luke. Of course, what Grand Chokmah considered "winter" was more like spring as far as the Baticul-born noble was concerned, but the sight of a gentle frost along the water's edge and lack of bright green foliage still seemed to transform the city he was accustomed to visiting. Luke shivered, it wasn't all that cold by any means; the ocean on which the city was built staved off the coldest weather, but having come from Baticul where summer was in full swing, the stark difference left Luke wishing he'd grabbed his cloak before venturing out.

Pulling his coat a little tighter around him, Luke let out a huge sigh. He'd forgotten just how exhausting dealing with Peony could be, and they had spent a long time talking with him. Jade didn't help by giving him a technical rundown of how they'd eliminated the miasma that even Luke, who'd been the one to actually do it, couldn't follow. Then they had gotten onto the topic of Eldrant and what had been occurring on the front. Though Peony and his advisors went into infinitely more detail, they essentially told them the same thing Jade had surmised from the reports in St. Binah. It was sounding more and more like Master Van was somehow using the Planet Storm as a shield.

What concerned Luke most of all, was the reports that some of the small islands surrounding Eldrant had vanished. He couldn't understand it, how did an island just vanish? Jade explained that it was probably a matter of Master Van slowly consuming the original world to fuel the building of his replica one... but it was almost unfathomable. It absolutely couldn't be allowed! They had to stop Master Van before things really got beyond repair. The small islands were uninhabited, but what if it eventually reached Daath or Grand Chokmah? If the land just disappeared, what would happen to the people? Time was working against them... in more ways than one.

But for now, it was a waiting game. Jade was right in that Dist held the key to getting to Eldrant and the Colonel was off dealing with the paperwork involved in seeing him. So Luke and Asch were left wandering the city together, looking for a way to kill some time for a few hours until they were scheduled to meet up. They'd already been wandering for almost half an hour and Asch had yet to say a thing. Luke thought he'd give his sibling a bit of space, but Asch's silence was really
"What's the matter?" Luke asked, trying to keep his tone as nonchalant as possible. "What has you so down in the dumps lately? And before you say nothing, don't. Something is definitely bothering you."

Asch turned his head towards his sibling and gave him a very pointed look.

"Oh," Luke returned to staring at the ground. Of course, he knew what had Asch down, he'd just dared to hope it was something else... something simpler, something that was actually possible to fix. Talking to Jade a bit more in depth and looking into it on their own hadn't given either of them any shred of hope. It was inevitable, and they had both come to the same conclusion, the same morbid acceptance: they were going to die.

Luke could feel that shadow looming over him, the weight on his heart that seemed to intensify as it fed off his sibling's dreariness and despondence. No... Luke shook his head, trying to shed the darkness that had clouded it. He absolutely refused to be like this! He was not going to spend the last of his life wallowing around; he wasn't going to waste that precious time on regret and disappointment. He was going to enjoy every moment he had left, and he would build memories worthy of remembrance.

"Oh that," Luke picked up, brushing the fact off as easily as some dust from a countertop. "Try not to think about it so much. You're thinking about it all the time and you really bring everyone down."

Asch didn't offer a reply.

"Well," Luke said tauntingly, prodding his sibling both mentally and verbally. "At least you aren't doing the same thing you did the last time you figured you weren't going to be around much longer."

"Please," Asch finally answered with a roll of his eyes. "I think I learnt my lesson last time."


"No, pushing everyone away never works because some people are just too damn stubborn."

"And proud of it!" Luke declared earning a chuckle from his sibling.

"How does it not bother you?" Asch finally asked.

"Well I figure there isn't much point in worrying about things you can't change," Luke shrugged. "It's like being really upset that the sky is blue. No matter what your feelings are, the sky isn't turning green anytime soon, so you might as well enjoy it for what it is."

"I guess that's true," Asch agreed. "You could stand to tone it down a bit though," he added. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you're thrilled about the whole thing."


"I might have to," Asch challenged with a grin. "I bet I could get the others to help; I don't think anyone could stand another day cooped up in the Albiore with you and your personal beam of sunshine."

"Hard to be jealous when there isn't anything there to want."

"Jerk!"

Asch started to laugh and Luke quickly followed suit. The older redhead let out a sigh and allowed the clouds looming over his thoughts to be brushed away, knowing they'd return, but enjoying the reprieve none-the-less. Honestly... where would he be without his little brother? As annoying as Luke's endless cheer got at times, he was glad there was someone around to remind him to keep things in perspective.

Though being well adjusted probably wasn't the only reason Luke had been so happy lately. Whether his little brother realized it or not, Asch suspected most of it had to do with a certain young melodist he'd been spending more time with than ever.

"What?" Luke finally asked, noticing the way Asch was staring at him.

Asch didn't answer for a second, only stared a Luke for a long hard moment. Finally with a sigh he said, "I think you should tell Tear. You know you'll regret it if you don't."

Asch saw every trace of a smile fade from Luke's face, his expression becoming defensive in a flash.

"Why should I?" Luke demanded "You're not telling Natalia!"

"Natalia knows I love her," he replied with entirely too much satisfaction.

Luke's face suddenly turned beet red. He tried to stutter a reply but came out with nothing but an incomprehensible mess. Asch's grin spread from ear to ear.

"Now who's the one thinking about it all the time?"

Luke opened his mouth but it was obvious he couldn't come up with any reasonable reply because he shut it again and crossed his arms.

"Cheater..." he mumbled through his pouting expression.

"Hey guys," Anise greeted the boys from behind. Luke and Asch both turned around to face their friend who seemed unusually hesitant around them.

"Hey Anise," Luke replied cheerfully, his face still somewhat red from Asch's earlier commentary. At least at this point he could almost blame it on the temperature. "What's up?"

"Well... It's just that..." Anise trailed off.


"In Daath you told me Ion had left you a message you could only give me in Grand Chokmah!" Anise spat out in a single breath. "I mean... if it's not too much trouble... Jade is still busy getting things together. Could you tell me what it is now?"


"Would you mind at all if we tagged along?" Natalia asked.
"We don't have much else to do," Tear added.

"Sure," Luke replied, his smile widening. Asch simply shook his head but offered Natalia his arm. She was smiling as mischievously as he was at the oblivious couple.

"What do you mean?" Anise asked. "Where are we going?"

"It's not a message I can tell you," Luke provided as he began to lead them through the narrow streets of the city's inner areas. "It's somewhere Ion asked me to take you."

Anise spent the better part of the next ten minutes racking her brain, trying to even fathom where Ion could have wanted her to go. She didn't know where they were going, she recognized the street they were on but couldn't think of anything worth noting down here, just a bunch of small cafes and fruit shops. Maybe Luke was just lost, yeah that must be it. He probably couldn't quite remember where whatever this thing he had to show her was. It was the only idea that remotely plausible, never mind probable.

Falling behind her four companions, Anise watched Asch, with his arm around Natalia looking questioningly at Luke. He never said anything, but the way his expressions shifted, and he kept stealing glances at her, Anise could surmise he was getting an explanation from Luke. She grumbled; there were days she really hated that connection of theirs.

Finally Luke stopped them in front of a small shop on the corner. The place didn't look very big, but it seemed fairly well kept. The signs above the door identified it as a fruit and vegetable shop, something that was confirmed by the empty display boxes that lined the shop exterior. In the summer they would be filled with colourful fruits and vegetables from Engeve but for now they remained bare, making the shop less inviting. In the window several bunches of colourful fruits hung enticingly above some freshly made pastries, colourfully decorated with various icings. What in the...

"What are we doing here?" Anise asked. "Not to be rude or anything, Luke, but if you want to stop for a snack, can it wait?"

"No, this is it," Luke replied.

"What?" Anise was genuinely confused by this point. "Why did Ion want you to take me here?"

Luke's gentle smile never wavered. "Go inside and you'll see. We'll wait for you out here."

Anise had never felt quite as uneasy as she did opening the door to the small shop. As soon as she entered the smell of freshly baked bread filled her nostrils and the chime of a small bell signalling her entrance rang. Anise took a few small steps forward; the place seemed completely deserted.

"Hello! Welcome to-

The familiar voice sent every thought the former Fon Master Guardian might have had to a screeching halt. It... it couldn't be... Anise felt every muscle in her body begin to shake.

"M-m-Mama?"

"Oh Anise!" Pamela flew around the counter and the next thing Anise knew, she was trapped in her mother's embrace. "I was so worried about you! After I heard what happened to the Fon Master I couldn't help but think something may have happened to you too! I'm so glad you're okay!"

This was a dream; there was no other possible explanation for it. Anise felt her heart race and her
stomach turn into knots. Any minute now she was going to wake up and be in her bed, still alone in the world; still alone in a reality where her parents had starved by the roadside. It just... it couldn't be real. She'd destroyed her family with her treason; she didn't dare hope she could have been forgiven for that... Yet the seconds passed by, and the illusion never faded.

"But how? What are you doing here?" Anise managed to ask. "H-How did you get here from Daath?"

"It was the Fon Master who brought us here," she explained. "He told us we had to leave the Order and that it was very urgent. He introduced us to His Majesty and requested that he find us a place to stay and work and we ended up here. The Fon Master told us we couldn't rely on the Score to provide for us anymore, and that we would have to provide for ourselves so as not to be a burden. We always thought it was such a blessing to be able to rely on the Score, we didn't realize how difficult we were making things for others."

"M-Mama," Anise felt the tears burning behind her eyes; their coolness as they fell from her cheek into her mother's cream apron.

"Oh Anise, I'm so glad you're alright. Papa and I are so proud to see you out there fending for yourself."

"Papa's alright too?"

"He's fine too dear, he's off running errands for the shop owner."

"Papa's running errands?"

"Yes, the shop owner has been very kind to us. He showed us how to do everything properly and he even lets us stay in one of the rooms above the shop here."

Anise tried to choke back the tears but failed; even hearing the bell above the door, signalling that the others had come inside, she didn't care. Anise buried her head in her mother's warm embrace and sobbed.

"Anise, Anise," Pamela gently stroked her daughter's back. "What's the matter dear?"

"I- I-" Anise's chest heaved. "I thought you'd starved! I thought I'd lost you!"

"Shhhh," Anise's mom began to gently rock her. "Come now dear, the Fon Master wasn't like that at all. He would never leave anyone to starve or be without somewhere to go. He was a wonderful person."

"I know..." Anise managed. "I know he was."

Anise's crying increased in intensity. Tear smiled and turned to Luke. "I think we should let them be for now."


And as silently as they'd entered, Luke and his friends left Anise with her family.

The dungeons in Malkuth's military headquarters were surprisingly well lit. Not that Natalia was quite certain exactly what she was expecting, the term 'dungeon' had always lent itself to the image of something dark, wet and hostile. She'd always been scared to venture in the castle dungeon when
she had been a child and even now she seldom saw any reason to go down there. Still, this place was a far cry from the ancient crypts they'd been held in when they'd been captured in Daath. It may be a dungeon, but at least it was still civil.

Natalia followed along behind her fiancé, unsure what to expect from the impending encounter with the former God-General. Did Jade truly think that Dist would provide them with the information that they needed? The Colonel had told them reports stated Dist as cooperative and not making and attempts at escape since his arrest. Still, it all seemed a bit suspicious to her. Even if Dist had no particular loyalty towards Van, certainly he would fear retribution for betraying them. To tell the enemy how to enter what must certainly be their base was no small matter. Were he to do so, it could well mean his life at the hands of his former allies, even despite his imprisonment. What then did Jade intend to do to force this information out of him? Natalia wasn't sure it was something she even wanted to know.

Dist's cell was located deep within the military complex, and the security surrounding him was no laughing matter. There was no doubt they'd factored in his previous escape when they'd made the decision as to where to hold him. The cells here had no windows like some of the lower security cells did, no cool breeze wafted in off the ocean, but the room was still well kept, lit by several bright fonstones set strategically about the room. The cell itself seemed a decent size and it was somewhat of a relief to see that the man was being treated fairly, as one would expect of someone with his crimes.

"What is it now?" the researcher asked upon hearing their entrance, but as soon as he turned to see exactly whom he was addressing, his mood, if possible, deteriorated even further.

"Hello Saphir," Jade stated, his voice stern and unwavering. Natalia recognized it as what Luke had dubbed Jade's "business voice". She was certainly inclined to agree, he had such a powerful and authoritative aura that she couldn't imagine anyone dreaming of being uncooperative.

Well, anyone other than Dist.

"What do you want Jade," Dist sneered displeasingly. "Come all the way down here to mock me? To rub my failures in my face like you always do?"

"I want information from you," Jade continued, ignoring the accusation. "I want to know about the shields surrounding Eldrant, as well as how to disable them."

"And why should I bother telling you that?" Dist asked. "There's nothing else you could possibly take away from me. I see no reason to tell you how to destroy my last great creation."

"No, I think we all know how your last 'great creation' ended," Jade reciprocated. "It ended in failure."

"Shut up," Dist said defensively.

"It ended in failure just like all your other creations ended in failure," Jade continued heartlessly. "Like this creation will end in failure. Whether you tell us or not won't change this; but it may result in less pain on your behalf."

"Shut up Jade! My inventions are not failures! They will not fail!"

"They will fail," Jade cut Dist off, his towering figure looming condescendingly over the helpless researcher. "Each and every one will fail and the reason they will fail is because you are a failure."

"Shut up!"
"Jade, stop it!" Luke jumped in, putting himself between his friend and the former God-General. "It's not fair to keep picking on him for things that have already happened. He can't change what he's done in the past. Everyone makes bad choices; it isn't fair of you to harass him like that!"

The Necromancer let out an irritated sigh, and the hand that went to rub his temple belied his frustration. Clearly he'd forgotten to explain the concept of *interrogation* to their local defender of justice.

"Thank you, Luke," Jade replied shortly and the young noble shrunk back at his displeasure. Their eyes met and Luke quickly removed himself, fearing incurring anymore of the Colonel's anger. At least Luke was easily dissuaded; if this had turned into another one of the causes he had to stand for in that stubborn head of his, Jade would have not enjoyed dealing with Asch after he'd disassembled the monarch's little brother.

"Now-"

"You'll never get past Eldrant's shields," Dist cut the Necromancer off. "They were designed to harness the power of the Planet Storm and use it to create a turbulence that no ship can pass through."

"How can we get there then?" Natalia inquired.

"You can't," Dist replied.

"Surely you must come and go from there," Tear stated. "There must be some way through the shields."

"Short of someone on the inside letting you in, the only way you're going to get past them is if you shut the Planet Storm off!" Dist answered with a moderate degree of satisfaction. "I designed them to be completely impenetrable from the outside. It's completely impossible, you'd be better off just to give up now. We're all doomed to fall victim to Van's world anyways."

"What do you mean by that?" Tear asked. "My brother intends to abandon you for your failure?"

"What I'm saying is it doesn't matter if he abandons me or not, all paths end in death; so why not end in a manner worthy of one's existence?"

"Even his allies..." Guy mumbled.

"We're as bound to the Score as any of the other originals," Dist stated. "His goals won't be a reality until each and every original, including himself, is dead."

"That's so cruel," Natalia gasped.

"Then what was the point of him trying to get Guy and Tear to join him?" Luke asked. "He made it sound as if they would live if they came along. If everyone was going to die anyway, why bother?"

"A bit of his own selfishness," Dist shrugged. "He wanted to spend the last of his time with the people he felt mattered to him. I don't particularly care. Working with him got me closer to my goals; that's all that mattered to me."

"Even with what he's trying to do?" Guy asked.

"I said it already," Dist stated, his tone annoyed at being forced to repeat himself. "All paths end in death. Whether it's a death for his world or a death as written in the Score, it doesn't really matter in
"That's why you were so desperate to try and make the replica of your Professor, wasn't it?" Luke asked. "You wanted to make sure you'd at least tried to achieve that one dream before the end."

"I- It doesn't matter what you do," Dist folded his arms defiantly, turning his head away from the group though not quick enough to hide the embarrassment on his face. "You'll never get through Eldrant's shields! It's just not possible."

"Well," Luke said with a sigh. "I guess it looks like we're going to be turning off the Planet Storm."

"What?" Dist practically cried out.

"This isn't exactly going to fly that smoothly," Asch commented, ignoring the eccentric researcher.

"Yes," Jade agreed. "We're talking about altering the very foundation upon which our current society sits; a revolution on the scale that has not occurred since Yulia's time."

"In other words, it's a political nightmare," Guy surmised.

"No problem," Asch said with a hint of sarcasm. "Politics are my specialty."

"Indeed," Natalia stepped up. "I'll assist with the negotiations on Kimlasca's side as well."

"Then I guess that leaves us with proposing the idea to Peony," Guy said. "This isn't going to be easy."

"No one ever said it would be," Asch refuted. "But it's something that has to be done. After coming this far we aren't going to stop now."

"You're all out of your minds!" Dist exclaimed so loudly that he finally caught the group's attention. "If you shut off the Planet Storm there won't be any source of renewable fonons! Fontech would become almost unusable; forget what would happen to the fonists and fonic arts!"

"Perhaps, but it isn't as if the effects will become apparent immediately," Jade retorted. "There would be a few years before any changes would begin to become apparent."

"If Belkend can do anywhere near the work they did with the miasma, I don't doubt they'll be able to develop alternate sources of energy," Asch reasoned.

"I agree, and they'd have plenty of motivation to do it too," Guy said. "It'll be hard for Fonists in the meantime though."

"Those with enough talent will still be able to use fonic artes," Jade said with a shrug. "Those without will have to find a new means of sustaining themselves. I imagine Seventh Fonists in particular will have a difficult time."

"With the cessation of Score readings, there is already a good deal of Seventh Fonists out of job," Natalia pointed out. "The Order of Lorelei has done an excellent job managing them; I don't think this is a challenge that would be impossible to overcome."

"It's not a matter of whether we can overcome it," Luke pointed out. "We have to overcome it. We can't just ignore what Master Van is doing; it has to stop. The future beyond that is something we can work towards once we know we have that future."

"We really ought to get going," Natalia spoke up. "There's a great deal of work to do before we can advance any further in this, and it seems that time is working against us once again."

"You're crazy..." Dist muttered in disbelief, completely stupefied by the blind determination of this band of idiots. "You're all insane..."

Luke turned his head, smiling over his shoulder at the former God-General while his friends began filing up the narrow staircase. "We're just not the type to give up," he said simply. "If we're going down, we're going to go down fighting."

"Even when it's pointless?"

"Especially when it's pointless," Luke replied with a grin. "Thanks for helping us," he added. "Once you've served your sentence here, I wish you all the luck. I'm sure you'll figure out what you're really looking for."

Luke turned around to see Guy and Asch both waiting patiently for him to finish. Luke jogged over to join them. He wasn't sure exactly why, but he felt really sorry for Dist. Even though in the back of his mind he knew that Dist had done countless terrible things, he recognized that look in Dist's eyes. That fear of the unknown, of not knowing where your place in the world was anymore; the feeling of being so completely and utterly lost that to give up would be a blessing. He'd been there, he knew how dark that road could become; so maybe, just maybe, he could share with the former God-General something he'd received from his friends time and time again: hope.

"The 24th of Shadow-redecan!"

"What?" Luke turned around, confused at the random date Dist had just shouted after him. Both Asch and Guy also stopped. "What about it?"

"You didn't know what day you were born on, right? So there!" Dist punctuated his point by crossing his arms and embarrassingly turning his back to the bars of his cell and his last few visitors. A smile spread widely across Luke's face.

"Hey, that wasn't all that long ago," Guy pointed out. "I guess that means you're officially 8 years old," he added ruffling Luke's hair.

"Yeah, I guess so," he replied cheerfully. He was 8 years old! And yet... the satisfaction behind his smile all but vanished and while the expression remained, Luke suddenly felt completely empty inside.

He was 8 years old.

He wondered if he would ever make it to 9.

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The dark hallways of Malkuth's palace offered Luke little solace. He'd been wandering aimlessly for almost an hour now, no goal in mind, just hoping that the motion would offer him some peace. It surprised the young noble just how unsettled he'd become now that Asch wasn't around. His older brother had left over two weeks ago with Natalia to go propose their radical idea of stopping the Planet Storm to Baticul's court, and while Luke knew full well that Jade and Guy both still had their hands full here in Malkuth; he still hated sitting around and doing nothing. He hated that he lacked the power or the knowledge to help either side.

Yet Luke knew that wasn't the only reason he was so unsettled. He missed talking to Asch, missed their casual chats about nothing, the time they'd steal away from the others, the brief times he
could get his mind to stop thinking about his fate. Talking with his other friends wasn't the same... because even when they didn't even remotely broach the topic, deep down, Luke knew he was lying to them. In every moment, every conversation, all he could think about was that he had to hide the fact that he was dying from them, that he could never be completely honest. That guarded feeling, that wall he'd set up left him feeling so isolated; Asch was really the only person he could genuinely talk to without hiding anything, or pretending to be happy when he wasn't.

Jade knew the truth too, of course, but Jade has his own worries, namely trying to convince Malkuth's court to go along with an unbelievably radical plan. He didn't have the time or the need to listen to Luke whine about something inevitable.

Maybe it would just be easier to be honest, to tell the others the truth about his condition. Luke knew full well what they would say to him if they found out he was keeping secrets again, and he wanted to tell them the truth! He really did! He didn't want the last times he spent with his friends to be a lie... It was just... it was just that he was scared. No, scared didn't even begin to cover it, he was terrified. He was terrified at the thought of dying, of disappearing forever. He knew now that all the talk he'd done, to the others and to himself about being ready to sacrifice himself for the miasma had been a lie. He hadn't really understood death, but now that he did, that knowledge haunted his steps in the depth of the night when there was no one around.

Luke knew he could never tell the others; far stronger than the desire to tell the truth, was the fear of what would come of that truth. No matter how hard they tried, Luke knew his friends would look at him differently, treat him differently and every time they looked at him with that pity in their eyes, he'd be reminded again that he was going to die. He couldn't handle that. He wouldn't be able to find reason to get out of bed each morning.

Luke's pace picked up; he strode down the hallways, trying to escape the shadows of his mind. He just needed something to do, a way to distract himself. If he was like this when Asch got back tomorrow, he knew there was no way he could keep face for his older brother. As hard as he was finding this, Asch was taking it just as hard and Luke had made it his mission to keep his brother from being depressed. It gave him reason to always look on the positive side, a motivation behind the cheer he'd been determined to express. He just needed to calm himself down.

Walking by one of the empty rooms, the outline of something familiar caught Luke's eye as it sat in the moonlight. Taking a closer look Luke could already feel himself calm down a bit as memories, fond and not-so-fond, all came back to him. Running his hand along the black stained hardwood, Luke knew exactly what he could do.

It had been a long time...

Tear quietly slid down one of the palace's many corridors, putting every effort into not disturbing anyone who might trying to sleep down here. The young melodist knew little of the building's layout beyond the main halls and the guest rooms, for all she knew this was where the servants slept. Other than trying to be inconspicuous, Tear was trying to figure out what in all of Auldrant Luke would be doing down here. Anise had kindly directed her this way after having seen Luke follow the same path earlier, but Tear still couldn't imagine why.

Whatever his reasons were for wandering the castle at night, they were making him difficult to track down. Tear wanted to find him because she needed to talk to him. She'd ignored it for the past little while, but she just couldn't shake the feeling that there was something he wasn't telling her, and she was ready to confront him about it.

Before Tear could continue to formulate her resolve to get answers from her companion, the most
beautiful melody reached her ears. Soft at first, the sparse notes increased in volume and power as they began to run together in harmony. It was unlike any piece she'd ever heard before, and it carried with it such a powerful sorrow. Tear could feel her heart ache as each note blended effortlessly into the next. She thought to herself, that if music could cry, this is what it would sound like.

Without even realizing what she was doing, Tear found herself following the sound, tracing the melody to a small room at the end of the hallway. The space was small, but not at all cramped. Two large windows opened out onto the garden and let moonlight pour into the room. The silver light danced off a dust laden piano, though the sound that came from it was as pure and as beautiful as if the instrument were brand new.

At the head of the piano, Luke sat; his fingers dancing effortlessly across the ivory and ebony keys. Tear could hardly believe it; she had no idea Luke had such a talent for music. He had more than talent though, he had a gift. His eyes were closed, his breathing rhythmic and in time to the song he played from memory. Tear simply leaned against the door frame and listened, wondering now more than ever what secrets Luke hid beneath his cheerful exterior.

Because no one that happy, could play a song so heartbreakingly sad.

The song picked up in intensity, never losing its gentle or disconsolate tones. Luke never once looked up; Tear couldn't bring herself to look away. She was so completely captivated in the music that came from this one boy; this one person who seemed on the outside to be a ray of sunshine, unflinching, unwavering, but whose heart played a song worthy of the greatest requiems. The piece came to an end, the last note hovering in the air before fading away into the night. Luke let out a deep breath and as that note died off, he opened his eyes. He stared at the keys for a moment before looking up. His eyes widened a bit when they met her own.

"Tear," Luke said, his voice betraying a hint of surprise. "I didn't know that you were listening."

"That was beautiful," Tear commented, stepping forward and sitting herself next to Luke on the bench. "Where did you learn to play like that?"

"My parents forced me to learn when I was a kid," Luke explained somewhat fondly. "They'd make me practice when Asch had to go up to the castle to do king stuff. My father would say I may as well do something useful with my time; I used to really hate it. But now...I'm kind of glad they made me keep it up."

"I am too," Tear said. "You have such a talent for it; it would have been a waste."

"I don't know if I'd say that." Luke blushed a little and chuckled as he ran his hand through his hair self-consciously.

Tear returned his smile, staring into that perfect mask he had on. Not one hint, not even an inkling that something wasn't right. His smile was genuine, his eyes alight, but the heart-breaking melody still lingered in the moonlight, telling of secrets concealed in the shadows. Tear knew she just couldn't let this go, yet, she still feared what she might see when that mask came off.

"So," Luke asked with a bounce in his voice. "What has you up so late?"

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you about something?"

"What is it?" Luke asked worriedly. "What's going on?"

"No, it's nothing like that," Tear immediately replied. Stupid, of course he'd get worked up after she
went through the effort to track him down so late at night. "I just wanted to ask you something, and I didn't think you would tell me if I asked around the others."

"What did you need to ask me then?" His expression changed from worry to one of confusion. Tear could feel her resolve begin to waver; she began to doubt herself. Luke seemed fine, he seemed better than fine... he finally seemed happy, free of heavy burdens and silent pressure. Was she completely off her mark?

"I want to know what's wrong with you lately," Tear finally said. Though every inch of her screamed at her to hold back, she knew that she couldn't. She cared for Luke, and she wanted him to be happy; but it was because she cared for him, that she knew she couldn't let this charade continue.

"Wrong?" Luke asked curiously. "What makes you think something is wrong?"

"You've been so cheerful lately," Tear said almost hesitantly. "You always do that when you're trying to hide something painful, or when you're keeping secrets. There are so many times when you pause before saying something, like you're trying to censor your words. If no one is around, you're always off in your own little world. What are you not telling me?"


"Luke, what's been bothering you lately?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Luke replied.

"What?" Tear was completely caught off guard as her query was sent right back at her. Luke thought she was hiding something? She wasn't... there wasn't anything she was trying to keep from him. What was he seeing in her, that she, herself didn't see?

"I could ask you," he repeated. "But I think I know the answer."

"I-I still don't know what you're talking about."

"It's Cantabile, isn't it? You haven't said a thing about her since her death, haven't approached the topic at all; even Guy's noticed. You're actually bothered about it, aren't you? And why shouldn't you be? The two of you used to be really close... right?"

Luke's words hit her like a punch to the gut. With everything that had happened so quickly, she'd buried those feelings. All that regret, the guilt she felt for not being able to stop her former instructor, she'd hidden it away where it wouldn't get in the way of what she knew she had to do. She didn't want to insult Luke or Asch... Cantabile had very narrowly missed murdering their mom, had almost killed them and yet... Yet she still...

"It's okay, you know," Luke whispered. "To feel sad, to grieve, there's nothing wrong with that."

"Cantabile was like a big sister to me," Tear finally said. "When I was really young, she would take care of me when my brother was away and my grandfather was busy. Even when she joined the Order she would come visit me; and when I first joined, she gave me extra lessons to help me catch up to the others. Major Legretta eventually took over most of my instruction, but Major Cantabile would always come around to see me. I know what she was doing was wrong... I know that things couldn't have ended any other way, but... I'm sorry, Luke."

"No, don't apologize. Those feelings aren't wrong," Luke replied. "There isn't anything wrong with regretting that she lost her life. She was someone very important to you, and I wish that her life
didn't have to be sacrificed like that. I'm sure Guy feels the same way, she was someone special to you both."

"But she still tried to-"

"She fought for what she believed to be right," Luke cut Tear off. "In that way what she did really isn't so different from what we're doing. I'm sure there are lots of people out there that would hate me for some of the things I've done. Akzeriuth, the Tower of Rem... I've taken a lot of lives. Even all the Oracle Knights we fought were someone's son or daughter. That kind of loss comes with resentment and hatred."

"Luke..."

"But that's why we need to try our best. We need to try our hardest to make sure that no one else has to die. After all, saving the world is meaningless if you don't have anyone left to share the future with. It's pointless if you lose everything that matters in the process."

"Now you get it," Tear replied with a fond chuckle. She shuffled over, leaning her head against Luke's shoulder, letting her eyes trace the moonlight that danced off the ivory keys of the piano. He was so warm... That warmth penetrated her, seeping into her and bringing with it a peace that she hadn't felt in a very long time. She hadn't even realized how heavy of a burden those suppressed feelings had been until she'd finally been able to give voice to them. To let all that regret out and to hear Luke's comforting words in return was so liberating. Her heart felt lighter than it had in a very long time.

"I think maybe we should head to bed," Luke suggested after several minutes of silence.

"Not yet," she said, sighing deeply and resenting how she was about to destroy the moment of peace she'd found.

"You know Anise won't let us hear the end of it if we both sleep in until noon," Luke teased.

"You're not avoiding it Luke," Tear replied solemnly. "You're not going to dodge the question by talking about something else. You still haven't answered me about what's bothering you."

"You don't miss a thing." The expression on Luke's face was suddenly filled with regret.

"Is it that hard to trust me?" Tear asked.

"No! It's not like that at all!"

"Then what is it? What is it that you can't tell me, what are you so desperate to avoid?" She asked. "Why can't you confide in me? I just want to be there for you, like you've been there for me. I want to be the one you can turn to when you're bothered by something! I want you to-!" Tear cut herself off, her cheeks turning red as she realized what she had been about to say.

"N-Never mind," Tear picked up. "Forget it. Let's just go to bed."

"No, you're right," Luke spoke up, barely louder than a whisper. "There is something I've been hiding from you; something that I haven't been able to talk to you about. The truth is... I've been thinking about it a lot lately, so I'm sorry if I've seemed like my mind is elsewhere."

Tear could feel her heart beating in her throat. Suddenly, she didn't want to hear what Luke was about to say, she wanted to run. Run so far that she could escape the truth she'd so desperately sought, to escape the consequences it would bring, but her legs had turned to stone and wouldn't
listen to her screaming mind.

"The truth is... I haven't said anything because I'm scared. I'm scared of what it means, of what it'll do to the future because I don't want anything to change. I'm just so happy with how things have been, with how things are now that I couldn't bring myself to tell you. But you're right in what you said... it's not fair of me to be avoiding the subject with you, and to be hiding things from you."

Tear's heart was racing so fast she was sure her chest would explode. Blood poured in her ears but she heard every word Luke said, forsaking any other existence that might linger in the world around her. His intense emerald eyes pierced her own, trapping her entirely with his gaze. She barely remembered to breathe.

"I don't... I don't think of you as a friend Tear," Luke confessed. "I haven't for awhile now. You mean so much more than that to me. Every time I'm around you, everything in the world is right, and being with you makes me feel so incredibly happy. I don't have to worry about everything that's happening, all the problems we have to face, I can just be myself. You mean everything to me; I can't even begin to imagine not having you in my life. Tear... I... I love you."

From racing so fast she could have fallen over, Tear's heart came to a screeching halt at the words that escaped Luke's mouth. It just wasn't possible... this had to be a dream. There just wasn't any way that she was allowed such a thing. After the things she'd done, all the times she'd been harsh with him, the times she'd turned her back on him, been cruel to him... he couldn't possibly be offering her everything she could have ever hoped for.

Tear sat speechless.

Luke bit his lip. "I'm sorry; it's not fair of me to spring that on you like that. If you don't feel the same, it's fine. I really hope this isn't going to ruin our friendship..."

Snapping from the daze she was in, Tear scrambled for the words to answer. "Luke, you're such an idiot!" She wrapped her arms around his neck, embracing the warmth he gave her. Her heart felt aflutter and Tear couldn't possibly imagine being happier. "It's the same, I feel the same way," she managed to get out. "I knew it when I almost lost you... you mean the world to me. All I want is to be able to stay at your side forever."

To hear the words from her, Luke felt an intense wave of relief. In the wake of that relief came excitement, joy, a tide of feelings his thrumming heart couldn't begin to process. She felt the same way... those words he'd wanted to hear from her for so long, feared they may not come since the day Asch had teased him about the matter, since he'd begun seriously considering his feelings. Now everything seemed to fall into place; the world in this moment was perfect, flawless. Tear's embrace cut through the shadows of the night and lit his heart. He held her back, embracing the warmth in his arms, the warmth in his life that could be so cold at times, knowing now that she would always be there for him. It was like a living dream, and if Luke could wish for anything, it would be that time stop here, and never move forward.

But beneath the hoards of joy, Luke could feel the guilt starting to gather. He was so selfish... He hadn't lied to Tear; every single word had been genuine and the truest he'd ever spoken, but in its own way this was the cruelest thing he could have done. He should have kept it to himself, taken his love for her with him until the end... Instead he'd chosen to indulge his feelings and told Tear the truth, all while knowing just how much harder it would be on her when he vanished.

*I'm sorry Tear...*

Luke held her close so she wouldn't see his brimming tears.
Forever is the one thing I can’t give you.
The young melodist roused from her sleep to find the sun's warm rays filtering through the window. The light that cast over her bed warmed her and Tear found herself reluctant to leave the confines of her covers. Laying there, her eyes half open gazing lazily at the ceiling, she wondered if everything that had happened last night had been no more than a dream. It had been perfect enough to be one, but it wasn't so fleeting as the images that were otherwise scattered throughout her sleep. No, the melody of Luke's song still danced in her ears, the warmth of his arms still held her. It hadn't been a dream at all, and that realization made her heart soar.

Sitting up and discarding what remained of her sleep-induced haze, Tear slipped out of bed. A casual glance out the window put the sun much higher in the sky than she'd expected. It must be close-to, if not lunch time already. Yet this realization didn't startle her as it once had. She smiled; Luke's laziness must be rubbing off on her. She could no longer find the purpose she once had in being awake at the crack of dawn each and every day even when there was no reason to do so. If there was no need for punctuality, she didn't see the harm in sleeping in; especially when she had been up well into the morning hours. So while she still preferred to be up early rather than later, the small lapses didn't leave her berating her own weakness. She had a reason, after all. Running a brush through her tan hair, Tear couldn't wipe the smile from her face. If Anise was to bug her and try to imply that she and Luke had been up to other things so late at night, let her. Tear seriously doubted anything could ruin her mood today.

It was an old habit, being so strictly punctual, one leftover from her days as an aspiring soldier. Rising with the sun, to bed as soon as was reasonable to ensure strength and endurance for coming encounters; she had placed such value in so many such empty gestures. Consistency and obedience to rules whose purpose she realized now she had never really understood. It had been through those rules, that persona of the perfect soldier, that she had defined herself, given herself meaning, but not anymore. No, she wouldn't trade her encounter with Luke last night for anything, least of all for the mannerisms of a position she didn't even know she wanted anymore.

The thought caught the melodist off guard, and for the first time, Tear realized she really didn't have any intentions of returning to the Oracle Knights. With everything that had been going on, thinking of the future beyond their journey's end wasn't something she'd done at any length; so much was involved to just get through, if they even would, that beyond that was too much to consider. Yet the certainty with which the fact that her days as a soldier were behind her existed in her mind left her wondering when she'd subconsciously decided her future.

Perhaps it wasn't that she'd decided, rather she'd simply lost the reasons that had once driven her to pursue that path. Ever since she'd been young she'd wanted to become an Oracle Knight; but why? Tear had always known the answer; she'd done it for Van. She wanted to follow him, to be able to help him in any way that she could. To become a support for him like Major Legretta and Major Cantabile were, and to support the ideals of the Order she had grown up a part of. Then after she'd discovered his true intentions, Tear held fast to her position, knowing it was the only thing that would give her the freedom to stop him. What had she believed back then? What had she planned to do once she'd stopped her brother, saved the Outer Lands from his folly? Nothing. It was a simple as that. She'd never made any such plans; she'd expected the quest to claim her life.

Was that why she'd so readily accepted her fate when the miasma had contaminated her? Was it for the same reasons Luke had so simply accepted his fate at the Tower of Rem? She who had no future, no life once her brother was gone was the perfect sacrifice. Nothing would be lost; she'd planned this from the very beginning. Luke had been right; she was a hypocrite. But things were
different now, so completely beyond anything she could have envisioned that dark night when she'd first decided she had to stop her brother, no matter the cost. She never dreamed she would have her friends... she never dreamed she'd have Luke. They could find themselves a future together. They would carve themselves a place in this new world they were about to create.

Thinking of Luke, of spending a future together with him set lose a swarm of butterflies in her stomach and her reflection in the mirror took on a soft pink hue. Catching herself wondering what Luke was up to, she could have laughed. It wasn't so far gone that she'd forgotten all the times she'd watched different members of the Order with their love interests. The times she'd rolled her eyes at the way they foolishly went on about each other every waking moment; the times she'd mentally chastised their laxness with protocols just to spend an extra few moments together. Idiots, fools, stupid, lazy, smitten... she'd called them all these things; yet now she could understand completely where they were coming from. Maybe they were foolish, maybe she was too; but if it was between being called a fool and choosing not to see Luke today, they could call her what they pleased.

Maybe she would go see if Luke felt like taking a walk in the gardens with her.

Taking one last glance in the mirror, Tear deemed herself presentable. She'd never been much one for embellishments; accessories, make-up, all those other things that Anise and Natalia seemed to live for at times seemed like such a waste of time. Still... Tear's hand kept fingerling her bangs, fighting with some strands that wouldn't stay put the way she'd like them to. A knock on the door nearly made her jump; startled, she quickly settled and felt excitement consume her. Maybe it was Luke?

The flash of crimson hair when she opened the door sent her heart fluttering for only a split second before the realization crashed on her with the weight of his heated gaze: it was definitely not Luke.

Natalia stretched her arms as she walked down the hallway, suppressing a yawn. It had been rather late when they'd gotten back last night and she'd yet to adjust to the change in time between the two capitals. That her lack of sleep was the only thing the young princess could complain about, however, was something for which Natalia was very grateful. She wasn't happy about having just dumped such a massive mess onto her father's lap while he was still recovering, no matter how glad he was for the excuse to finally break the bed rest his doctors had him under; but it was something that truly couldn't be helped. None-the-less, it wasn't a topic anyone should have to handle at the best of times; but it was one that was, unfortunately, completely unavoidable.

To say the subject of shutting off the Planet Storm was a political mess didn't even begin to do justice to the complexity of the matter and the sheer number of meetings and debates she'd attended was enough to do her lack of sleep justice. She wasn't the only tired one; Asch had likely dealt with as much, if not more than she had for the duration. It did him well though; at least it had put to ease concerns from many of the advisors who had objected to his decision not to take on the responsibilities of the throne when her father had taken ill. After everything he had done in the past couple weeks, no one could doubt his dedication to Kimlasca's future.

The entire thing had been quite the ordeal, but from what she'd heard from Jade, there had been just as much chaos in Malkuth's courts. She had to respect the Colonel for his ability to manage court affairs without actually being a member of the court. It had been difficult enough for her, and she was the princess. She couldn't even begin to fathom the challenges he'd encountered; he had Peony's support, she supposed, but a challenge it must have been none-the less.

For all their efforts, however, they had finally managed to produce results and both countries had come to the same conclusion. They would allow the shutting of the Planet Storm; likewise they
would join forces in seeking ways of conserving fonons and developing new energy sources. The
details of the latter had yet to be worked out, but it would be a joint operation on the scale of which
neither country had seen in a very long time.

All that remained now, would be the actual stopping of the Planet Storm which may be more of a
challenge than anyone could have anticipated, if such a method even existed. Surely, though, when
Yulia had created it, she must have had some method of stopping it should things have gone
wrong. It was finding such a method that would be a challenge. If they would find it anywhere,
though, Natalia was certain it would be in Yulia City. If nothing else, Tear would be happy for the
chance to return home; for all the time they'd spent in Baticul and Grand Chokmah, they'd really
little reason to return to the melodist's home and she'd been away for a great deal of time.

All those thoughts were brushed aside, however, when Natalia came across Anise. The former Fon
Master Guardian had her ear pressed up against a closed door and Natalia had to stifle a chuckle.

"Really now Anise," Natalia tit tatted. "If you're going to eavesdrop you might try being a little less
obvious about it."

Having been facing the other way, and being far too engrossed in her spying to notice Natalia's
approach, the dark-haired girl almost jumped at the statement, covering her mouth to muffle the
startled yelp that escaped.

"Geez, Natalia! Don't do that!" She hissed under her breath.

"What could possibly be so interesting that you aren't even on the lookout for people
approaching?"

"Didn't you hear? Didn't you hear?" Anise chirped excitedly, her eyes glowing at being the one
lucky enough to share whatever bit of gossip was about to escape her with the princess.

"Hear what?" Natalia willingly took her bait.

"Luke confessed last night!"

"Really?" Natalia asked playfully. "And who did he kill?"

"That's not what I meant!" Anise said with a pout. "He confessed to Tear!"

Natalia's smile widened, having taken the meaning the first time Anise had said it. It was about
time those two got off the starting block.

"That may be the case," Natalia replied. "But seeing as I'm quite sure I saw Luke getting lunch on
my way over here, who are you listening in on?"

Anise's grin widened and leaked a mischievous energy. "Who do you think?" She didn't await
Natalia's reply before once again gluing her ear to the door. "You wanna listen too, or what?" She
asked when Natalia was simply staring at her.

Natalia knew she really shouldn't; after all, it was none of her business, but between Anise's energy
and her own insatiable curiosity about such affairs, she just couldn't resist...

To be perfectly frank, Tear had absolutely no idea what had hit her when she'd opened the door to
her room less than an hour ago. She'd gone from hoping for a chance to have a good long talk with
Luke to being in an almost empty room halfway across the palace and feeling like she'd taken a
huge leap back in time. Sitting at a small table on an uncomfortable stool with a clear set of
distrusting, almost hateful emerald eyes on her, Tear felt like she was suddenly back on the
Tartarus after being arrested in Cheagle Woods. What was going on?

Racking her brains, Tear still couldn't fathom what had Asch so angry with her. Cold and closed
off, fiery and defiant; this was the boy she'd met over a year ago when he'd known nothing of her
except that she'd kidnapped his replica and tried to kill his instructor. Going over every possible
explanation, nothing would fit. Surely the fact that she was Van's younger sister wasn't only now
becoming an issue. Could he have heard something in Baticul that had him questioning her
loyalties? But what could he have heard? And from whom? Tear knew she hadn't done anything
even remotely questionable, and she wouldn't discredit the young noble enough to think he'd
actually believe anything the God-Generals would tell him. He knew better than to give any more
consideration to their efforts than an attempt to create chaos.

Asch barked another question and Tear felt herself reflexively answer, not even giving thought to
the words she gave him, flustered as she was by the sudden turn of events. She had to admire his
interrogation tactics. She wasn't even thinking before blurting out the truth, barely even registering
the question asked or the purpose of its inquisition. He never let up the pressure, never stopped
asking questions and so they continued. The faster she'd answer, the faster he'd ask. Tear began to
wonder if Asch had been studying with Jade. Either way, the longer they went on, the more she
began to fear what was about to come of this. She knew her innocence, but Asch was making her
start to doubt it.

Just when Tear thought this would never come to an end, silence hung in the air. Asch's next
question never came, and Tear hadn't noticed she'd been scarcely breathing for the entire duration.
Trying to be discrete as she caught her breath, Tear heard the table creak as Asch sat on it with a
sigh. She spent a moment letting her eyes trace his profile, the way the sun fell on his burdened
expression. There wasn't the youthful energy she always saw in his younger counterpart, nor was
there the bright carefree aura surrounding him, just a teenager weighed down by the unseen
obligations on his shoulders. Though he was just under a year older than she was, he felt so beyond
her at times. She opened her mouth twice before gathering the courage to make a sound.

"Umm, Asch?" Tear tried unsuccessfully to hide her hesitancy. Asch didn't even acknowledge her;
he didn't turn her way or even open his eyes. "Is there something you'd like to discuss with me?
What- What was all of that about?"

This time, Asch did turn to face Tear, but where she expected to see a harsh glare, she found a
mischievous, almost fond smile, and an energy that seemed almost foreign to him.

"You didn't honestly think I'd let anyone date Luke without passing by me first, did you?"

What? Tear didn't need a mirror to know she was redder than her inquisitor's hair. If she thought
she had been flustered during the questioning, it was nothing like she was now, her heart
thrumming in her throat while her mind frantically tried to recall every question he'd asked, every
detail she'd unknowingly given him. It hadn't even crossed her mind! How easily she kept
forgetting; their guise as siblings was so much more than a cover for Luke's secret. Asch was
Luke's big brother, through and through.

Tear opened her mouth, ready to spurt out some half formed defence-apology-excuse but she was
silenced by Asch who was trying his hardest not to laugh outright as he shook his head. The look in
his eyes, his posture; Asch didn't need to say a thing. Whatever she'd said, it was fine; he was
completely supportive.

It was a rare glance, a stolen window to a side of the young noble she'd never really seen before. It
was like the wall surrounding him had come down, no matter how temporary and she could see a bit of what made up such an incredible individual. For he was incredible, to accomplish the things he had, do the things he was required to do, and to have wit enough to challenge even Jade at times, there had to be something, someone, beneath all that. A person she'd never truly met, but that she suspected Luke knew completely.

"You can relax," Asch finally said, voicing what Tear had already surmised. "I never really doubted you, but I wanted to be sure. And have a bit of fun myself," he added mischievously.

"Yes... well..." Tear struggled, she wanted to say it aloud, but she was unsure if she could actually give voice to her feelings to someone other than Luke.

"But you know..." Asch said, sliding closer to the melodist until his face almost touched hers, running his finger gently along her jaw line. "I could show you how to have a lot more fun."

"Asch w-w-what are you talking about?" Tear almost hit the marble floor with the force of her recoil, only her reflexes saved both herself and the stool from the tumble. What the-? There was no way Asch of all people had just done what she could have sworn he just had. But when she returned to her seat, she still found him staring intently at her.

"Asch... stop it!" Tear protested again.

This time Asch leaned in and whispered in her ear. "Anise is eavesdropping on us, play along."

"What? No!" Tear violently protested. Asch stood up off the table. "Asch no!" Tear protested again. "I won't do that!"

"Why not?" Asch asked with a mischievous grin. "I promise you'll have a better time than anything you could do with Luke."

"No! Asch!" Tear sputtered, she could feel herself fluster and begin to choke out her words. "That wouldn't be fair to Luke!"

"I'm sure he won't mind, besides, it's not like he'll find out. It's not like either of us has to tell him." Asch's grin, if possible was even wider. He'd reached the door.

"But what if he does? It would be a huge misunderstanding! No! No I won't!" Asch twirled his finger, inviting her to continue. No! Tear refused to play his game, but all her protests were just falling right into place regardless, and the redhead was loving every second of it.

"Asch, stop it! I won't do this!" Tear stated firmly. He had to cover his mouth to muffle his laughter. "I'm not going to- Stop it! Stop doing this! It isn't fair!"

At her last protest, Asch twisted the handle and yanked the door open with all his might. Natalia crashed onto the floor with Anise tumbling into a heap on top of her. He simply stared at the two with one eyebrow raised.

"Whaaaaaaaaaat?" Anise pitched when she saw Tear sitting clear across the room. "Asch you jerk! You played us!"

Anise watched as the most satisfied smirk she'd ever seen on him spread across his face. How had he known she was eavesdropping? The stupid jerk!

"Sounds like your spying still needs some work," Asch remarked.
"Shut up," Anise spat sourly. She hated losing! To Asch of all people!

"What going on over here?" Luke had stopped in the hallway, his toast still in his mouth, staring at Anise and Natalia in a heap on the floor.

"Nothing you'll regret having missed," Asch said with a chuckle, stepping over the girls to join his sibling in the hall. "You want to come with me? I'm going to get myself some food."

Luke pulled the toast out of his mouth. "Sure," the redhead shrugged. "You guys coming, too?"

"We'll pass, thank you," Natalia managed with as much dignity as she could muster. Which wasn't much seeing as Anise was still sprawled out on top of her.

"With you? Not a chance!" Anise shot, sticking her tongue out. Asch just chuckled again.

"Fine by me, but you'd better grab something sooner rather than later," he said. "With everything ready to go, Jade's going to have us off before you know it."

Guy couldn't quite decide what he thought of Yulia City's library as he wandered through row upon row of dust-laden shelves. It was definitely extensive, he'd give it that; so while they were all the more likely to find the information they needed, the actual process of finding it was looking more and more like it was going to be a nightmare. Thankfully Teodoro, who by some stroke of divine luck happened to be back from Daath for a brief time, sent several of his best researchers to help them sort through the library's massive collection.

Figuring out how to shut off the Planet Storm was not going to be an easy task; none of them expected that it would be, but Guy was only now realizing just how difficult. From what he'd surmised already, Yulia had dealt with a lot of opposition in her time, and information on how to reverse the things she'd done was something she'd hidden almost as well as she'd hidden the Seventh Fonstone. Great, with their luck Van had the book they needed.

Plucking a couple volumes that looked vaguely hopeful, the blond began searching for the nearest table. Breaking free of the sea of shelves, Guy spied a spot, and better yet, he saw Luke sitting there alone, pouring over a set of rather complicated looking books. He almost laughed to himself.

If someone had told him a year ago, that he'd see Luke like this, he wouldn't have believed it even if had come from Yulia's mouth herself.

It was almost indescribable just how much his best friend had grown and changed over the past year. His level of maturity was something that even caught Guy off guard at times; so while he could still be a bit of an idiot, he was an idiot with a heart of gold, who was willing to do one thing he probably hated the most because it would help an entire sea of strangers. Luke had never once liked reading, now he tolerated it because he recognized there were areas in which he still had to learn, but Guy knew he still considered it the most boring thing known to mankind, especially the kinds of complicated texts he now had in his hands. Guy chuckled; he still probably didn't understand half of it, evidenced by the dictionary he was trying to hide in his lap.

Setting his own books down on the table, Guy grinned at the startled redhead who returned a disgruntled look before cracking a smile himself. "How's it going?" the blond finally asked.

"Really great," Luke answered cheerfully. "I'd be better if I could find the information we're looking for, but it's kind of cool sitting in such an old library. It's amazing to think of just how old some of these records probably are."

Guy raised an eyebrow suspiciously. "Okay, who are you, and what did you do with Luke?"

"Since when did you become the history fanatic? You've never cared about any of that kind of stuff."

"Yeah well... before I just never really took the time to stop and appreciate it, that's all. These people have all been gone for thousands of years, but I can still listen to what they have to say. That's pretty incredible."


"Luke, can I ask you something serious?"

"Go ahead."

"Why are you holding out on us?"

Luke chuckled. "Believe me," he said earnestly. "If I had found out how to shut off the Planet Storm, I would not still be pouring over these books."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

"Guy, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Luke, stop it," Guy said solemnly. "You think you're hiding it, and maybe if none of us actually knew you it would work, but I've been around you long enough to know when you're hiding something. You're overly cheerful all the time; you've suddenly taken a keen interest in things that you wouldn't even consider otherwise. You're obviously trying to avoid something."

"But I'm not!" Luke replied. "I was just thinking about it because my mind was wandering while I skimmed through these books."

"I'm not talking about just now," Guy argued. "You've been like that for awhile now, trees, birds, cloud shapes; everything is another excuse to be happy, everything another reason not to think about whatever it is that's obviously bothering you."

"Really Guy... I- I don't know what you're talking about."

"Luke, stop treating me like an idiot!" Guy snapped. "I've been your best friend for eight years; I know when you're lying!"

"I'm... I'm not," Luke's voice had become meek.

"Luke, if it's bothering you, then just tell us. We're your friends; I'm your friend. We can help you; don't try to handle everything alone."

"I..."

"Hey you two," Asch interrupted, setting a couple books down on the table. "What's going on?"

"Nothing really," Luke replied. "Guy and I were just chatting."

Guy cursed under his breath at Asch's arrival but neither redhead seemed to notice. The older sibling's all too convenient interruption couldn't just be coincidence. Either Asch had been eavesdropping from the start, or Luke had called him for help; either option left Luke looking all the more guilty, and Guy without any kind of answers.
"Do you really not trust me?" Guy asked.

"I still don't know what you're talking about Guy," Luke replied. "It's really nothing."

Damn; Guy had hoped Luke would fall for the verbal trap but he'd managed to avoid it. If Luke had returned that it wasn't a matter of trust, then he would have confirmed that there was something there. He was sure there was though, and if it was something over which Asch was ready to come to his defence, then it wasn't anything trivial.

"You don't have to stand there so defensively," Guy said sourly to Asch. "I'm not going to jump him."

Asch rolled his eyes, but Guy could see him lower his defences and take a seat at the table. Luke wasn't the only one Guy had spent the last eight years with; he knew most of Asch's mannerisms inside and out too. This secret, problem, whatever it was; they were both involved, and they were guarding it more fiercely than he'd seen them defend anything in a long time.

Guy was going to find out what it was, if it was the last thing he did. Then maybe, once and for all, he could pound it through their thick skulls that they aren't alone in this.

The sun had just crept down, spilling its golden glow across the horizon before vanishing completely, taking the last of the day with it. Tear watched it peacefully, sitting on her window sill. Across from her Natalia sat and both girls leant against the window, watching in anticipation as the first of the melodist's selenias opened their petals. It was a sight that never got old, and that never failed to awe her. The silvery petals catching the moonlight opened in bursts and soon the entire field was aglow. Tear smiled, both at the sight, and at the light on her best friend's face as she watched the spectacle for the first time.

She and Natalia had been sitting here chatting since they'd all retired from the library earlier that evening without having found any answers. Two days in and they still had nothing. It wasn't long enough to have Tear worried quite yet, but she fervently prayed that the answer would be found soon. Everyone, herself included, was starting to get a bit impatient and anxious to get moving. Every moment they spent here looking for answers was that much more time for her brother to plan ways of stopping them. Tear didn't doubt that they would have much more of a challenge accomplishing this than they did with the miasma. He wouldn't just sit back and watch this time around.

But for now, Tear was content to sit with Natalia and rest, prepare for the coming day. Words on the pages were blurring so closely together that she knew nothing more would get done tonight. They risked finding the answer and skimming mindlessly past it. She enjoyed the time she spent with the Princess, and even their shared silence was something the melodist deeply appreciated.

"Tear," Natalia finally spoke up again. "Might I ask you something rather personal?"

"Of course," Tear answered, wondering where the Princess' wandering thoughts had taken her.

"How did you feel when you found out your brother, one of your own family, had such a terrible plan?"

Tear paused a moment. "To be honest, it didn't feel real; it was like I was listening to a story about someone else. That it was really him, that the things he said were genuine, none of that really got through. I felt empty, completely blank; I didn't even know how to react."

"That sounds like such a terrible feeling..." Natalia mused. "But I think I know what you're talking
"You do?"

"Yes... when I first heard I wasn't really Kimlasca's Princess, I felt the same way. But I apologize for interrupting, please continue. What did you end up doing?"

"I didn't want to believe it, so I set out to prove that I was wrong, that what I'd heard was a misunderstanding, but instead I found out the truth. I tried talking to my brother about it time and time again but he would never tell me anything. He kept hiding the truth from me. I still remember when I first confronted him, when I first turned my blade on him; I felt like a cornered animal, blind with fear and anger."

"So you decided to stop him, no matter the cost."

"I did, but now that I look back, I know that I don't want anyone to ever have to make that choice."

"But if it comes to that or saving the world, what other choice is there?"

"I don't want to believe that anything is absolute," Tear replied. "And even if the Planet's Memory turns out to be absolute, I still want to save this world. Yulia read an absolute Score, but Luke isn't anywhere in it. I believe that that, that he is our hope. He's taught me just how much people can change. I've been able to put my hatred of my brother behind me and I think I can start to understand my brother's feelings."

"I don't understand, wouldn't that make confronting him all the more difficult?" Natalia asked.

"In a way, but at the same time, because I can understand his feelings I can also understand why we've come to this point. We both have different beliefs, different values that neither of us can sacrifice. I believe this world has a future and I will fight to defend it, no matter what."

"You're very strong Tear," Natalia commented. "Thank you."

"Not really," the melodist replied. "What makes you ask though?"

"No reason really..." Natalia supplied. "I simply can't imagine how something like that must feel."

Tear eyed her friend and something told her there was more to her inquisition than simple curiosity, but she let the subject drop. If there was something more there, Natalia would tell her when she was ready, and the Princess already looked in better spirits than before. Tear smiled, and Natalia returned the gesture gratefully.

Sometimes the hardest part, was knowing when not to ask.

If Anise had to assign labels to the members of their group she would probably label Luke as the clown. Asch was just anal, Tear was the responsible one and Natalia was organized in every area other than her emotions, which tied back to Asch, so that made plenty of sense. Jade wasn't anything of this world because no human could possibly be that smart, and she was obviously the cute-yet-incredibly-smart-and-witty one that any sane guy would give their left arm to be with. Maybe that was her problem, she was hanging out with a bunch of crazies. Then again, that probably made her a little crazy too. Oh well, it kept her other stunning features in check.

Guy though, Guy she would have labelled the laid back one. Sure he had things that mattered to him, things he got passionate about, everyone did; but for the most part he was really cool about
everything and could stop to look at most situations with a level head. So what had possessed him today, Anise had no bloody idea but it was scary. The man was on a mission.

First she sat through an hour of him impatiently fidgeting while reading. Fidgeting she could handle, if she held a book close enough to her nose, she didn't have to look at him, but when he started tapping his fingers on the table, she told him to take a hike. He came back ten minutes later with some new books, seeming to have worn off some of his energy with a few laps around this stupidly massive library. There was still that look in his eyes though, and whatever he was desperate to figure out was still eating away at him.

After having what Anise could only guess was some kind of epiphany from how hard the book he'd been holding hit the table (Geez, were these people all out to give her a heart attack before she hit puberty?), he asked her if she'd seen Jade this morning. No, of course she hadn't seen the Colonel this morning; no one had seen the Colonel this morning. In fact, no one had seen the Colonel in the last three days. He was so buried in books in some dark corner of the library that the God Generals could have picked him up and taken him away for all they knew.

So help her Yulia she was ready to drop a few of the larger texts over the blond's head. He was worse than Luke was for crying out loud! Listening to his chair scrape the floor, he was getting up again for the billionth time in the last 20 minutes to see if he could find Jade. She was never going to get anything accomplished at this rate! And the last thing she wanted was to have to spend another three days doing this crap!

Guy returned from his seventh tour of the library to find the table Anise had been sitting at empty. She'd taken all her books with her, showing that she had no intention of returning. Guy felt a little bad; he knew full well that he'd been grating her nerves all morning, and by all rights he should have been the one to move a long time ago, but this was the only table where he was sure he would be able to catch Jade if he either entered or left the library.

The young Malkuth Noble had spent the better part of the past two days trying to deduce exactly what his best friend was keeping from him. It bothered him more than usual. Guy couldn't explain it, but something told him he had to figure this out. Something about all this wasn't Luke and Asch's usual antics, it was something much more than that, and if he didn't figure it out, he was going to regret it forever.

Why it hadn't occurred to him to consult Jade before this morning, Guy didn't know. If anyone else had picked up on the twins' cues it would be the ever-observant Colonel. He desperately hoped that Jade could give him the piece of the puzzle that he was missing. Once he got it, everything would fall into place, and maybe then Guy could coax Luke from the depression he thought he was hiding. Guy hated feeling so helpless, and that feeling left him restless. He had to do something!

Just when Guy was ready to go off and do another tour of the library, Jade's familiar blue uniform emerged from the maze of shelves. He felt a wave of relief wash over him. Finally! His talk with Luke suddenly felt like weeks ago; he'd definitely done enough worrying to fill a couple weeks and then some.

"Ah, Guy," Jade remarked before the blond could say a word.

"Jade, I was wondering if I could talk with you for a minute."

The Colonel stopped, his eyes betraying a hint of surprise. Apparently Jade had been expecting to request something, not fulfill a request.

"Certainly," Jade replied, taking a seat at the table next to Guy. "What seems to be the problem?"
"Two redheads," Guy replied with a roll of his eyes.

"I don't see how that deviates from our daily occurrences," Jade replied and Guy couldn't help but chuckle at how Jade said that with such a straight face.

"They're hiding something again," Guy said. "I'm sure you've noticed the way they've been acting lately. At first I just kind of blew it off as lack of stress for once, but now I'm positive there's something they aren't telling us. Do you have any idea what it is?"

"I'm quite certain I haven't noticed a thing," Jade shrugged. "Other than perhaps it's about time we start restricting the amount of sugar in Luke's diet."

Guy froze at Jade's response, taking no amusement in the Colonel's little joke. More than a single red flag popped up; there was no way Jade hadn't noticed anything odd. Guy knew he could be overprotective when it came to Luke; old habits die hard, but there was no way he was dismissing this as all in his head. But why would Jade...

"You know what it is, don't you?" Guy demanded. Jade offered no reply, his face as flat and unreadable as ever. "Jade! You should know better than to be encouraging this!" Guy's voice rose as loud as he dared have it in the silent library. He just couldn't believe it, he'd have expected this of Natalia or maybe Tear but not Jade! "They're bad enough at always keeping everything to themselves without you hiding crap for them. It isn't healthy the way they never talk about what's bothering them; they need to learn to let their friends help them out everyone in awhile!"

Jade let out a heavy sigh. "Guy, I assure you that this isn't anything that you can help them with. No one can, it is simply a fact that they must come to accept. If you truly wish to help them, then act as their support, continue to be the friend you have always been to them."

"But-!"

"It's nice and convenient to get assistance from friends when necessary, but there are personal journeys that we all must take on our own. Of course even such things don't seem capable of separating those two."

"I get that, but I don't see why it has to be a secret."

"It is their decision to keep it that way. I would think you of all people would understand why."

"They don't want to be a burden," Guy concluded. "With everything going on, they don't want us worrying about them. Don't they get that we worry more when they don't talk about it? We'll be there for them, they don't have to do it alone."

"And they are aware of that. They know you are their friend, and if they need support they know they can turn to you. As long as they know you are willing to be of assistance, should they falter and need your help, they know they can turn to you at that time."

"I guess..."

"Do you trust that Luke would turn to you when he truly needed help?"

"Of course I do."

"Then try not to concern yourself too greatly. I suspect they will conquer their personal demons and be more themselves sooner rather than later."
"I wish I could be a sure of that as you seem to be," Guy commented sceptically. Something about all of this still didn't seem right to him. He could see Jade's perspective to some extent though. Continuing to hound Luke like he had would only leave his best friend feeling ostracized, and then if Luke really did need help, he wouldn't be able to ask. Still he couldn't get rid of the little voice in the back of his mind that was making his stomach turn.

*If even Jade will defend them... just how serious is it?*

Then Guy had a thought he wished had never crossed his mind.

"Guy, would you mind fetching the others?"

"What?" Guy snapped out of a daze. Jade was waving an especially old looking book in his hands.

"The others, would you mind gathering them?" Jade repeated sternly, a sign he was slightly annoyed that he had to repeat himself. "One of Teodoro's researchers has just found exactly what we need."

Whatever had been eating away at Guy from the inside out had obviously been dealt with by the time the blond had come to fetch Anise to join everyone else, but she still wouldn't say he was back to his normal laid-back self. Sitting at the table with everyone else, now he just seemed distracted; his meeting with the Colonel must have given him quite a bit of food for thought. Her brain, on the other hand, was perfectly happy to shut down for a little while and go into sponge mode. Jade had found their answer, now she just had to focus on absorbing it.

"So, Jade," Asch inquired, "What did you find?"

"Our earlier theories about Sword and the Jewel of Lorelei and their ties to the Planet Storm seem to be accurate. From what we've managed to surmise, to dispel the Planet Storm, the Jewel's power must be activated at the same sites where Yulia used the Sword to initiate the storm in order to shut it off."

"That would certainly explain why she took great care in hiding the Sword and Jewel," Natalia pointed out.

"She gave them back to Lorelei," Tear pondered. "Locking the key in the cage, an interesting tactic."

"So where is it that we have to go? Do we know where the Planet Storm was initiated from?" Natalia asked.

"Where else?" Asch pitched.


"Correct," Jade confirmed. "The fonic glyphs that power the Planet Storm should be located at those two passage rings. We will first shut off the Absorption Gate, and then the Radiation Gate in order to try and minimize fonom loss."

"Yeah, we wouldn't want to get stuck with just one gate sucking in the fonons," Asch agreed. "I'm sure Van would just love that," he rolled his eyes.

"Not really, I imagine that would put quite a kink in his plans too," Tear pointed out. "He needs a lot of fonons for his plan to work."
"All the more reason he's going to try and stop us," Guy stated. "We should be ready for the worst."

"I have a question," Anise piped up.

"Yes my dear Anise," Jade responded tauntingly.

"Just how big are these glyphs?"

"From the documentation we have, quite large; hundreds of feet at least."

"Am I the only one wondering where these massive things are supposed to be? I mean, between all of us getting separated last time we were at the Absorption Gate, we must have seen every inch of that place. Correct me if I'm wrong, but no one saw anything remotely close to what you're describing."

"That's true," Natalia agreed. "I don't recall anything like that."


"Actually, it seems that they are supposedly located below the passage rings themselves," Jade replied. "We wouldn't have seen it as we hadn't gone far enough in."

"You mean that crazy place goes even deeper?" Anise exclaimed.

"Now that you say that, I think I do remember seeing some kind of passage further down," Guy mused. "I can't quite remember it though, I wasn't really paying attention. There were more important things going on at the time."

"The only way we'll know for sure is to go look," Luke pointed out.

"Luke's right," Jade stated, setting the text down on the table. "We had best be on our way as soon as possible," he added. "Time remains, as it has always been, on General Grant's side."
Of all the places Natalia never thought she'd have the opportunity to witness again, the Absorption Gate was one of the few she wished she wouldn't. It was beautiful; she certainly couldn't deny that, but it was a dangerous beauty. Ice cold winds froze water on the jagged terrain, making it glisten in the light of the Planet Storm above. However, losing oneself gazing at the light that tore through the sky could easily mean death on such treacherous terrain and the Princess quickly returned her thoughts to the earth.

The lowering of the Outer Lands had altered the terrain surrounding the entrance, and Ginji couldn't manage to land where he had previously, meaning they would have to walk the icy trails to the Passage Ring's entrance. They traveled mostly in silence, though Luke and Tear seemed happily oblivious as the only ones engaged in conversation and the rest of them were more than entartained listening to exactly what the new couple was talking about. Natalia couldn't resist a smile; Tear seemed to have mostly recovered from Asch's attack on her the other day, though Natalia doubted the melodist would ever forget it. Natalia wouldn't; it brought back such a unique mix of joy and anger that the Princess wasn't entirely sure what to think about it all.

She was actually glad for her fiancé's antics; it had been so long since Natalia had seen him in good enough spirits to be so mischievous. So while she was angry at the way his prank had extended to her as well, that anger was directed mostly at herself, for believing such a thing long enough to be strung along. Yet, once all was said and done, much to her dismay, Asch had slipped back into his usual demeanour, and she wasn't quite sure how to interpret his most recent bout of broodiness.

Asch wasn't being anti-social as he had been in the past; quite the contrary, he could almost always be found with the rest of them, but his silence spoke far more than he had as of late. There was still something on his mind, something plaguing his thoughts in that silence and whatever it was, he was having a difficult time dealing with it. Natalia wanted to approach him, but was nervous in doing so. She had absolutely no idea what she could possibly say. It wasn't like she could walk up to him and demand to know what he was hiding. Everyone was entitled to their own personal affairs, herself included. There was more than one thing that she wasn't telling him. So instead she continued along, carefully watching her step and listening as Luke and Tear discussed their previous journey here.

Natalia smiled when Luke confessed that he never expected to return here, and it amused her to hear his thoughts run along the same lines as her own. Was it really any surprise? After all, the last time they had been here they'd been under the impression that they would be fighting to the death against Van to decide the fate of the world. In reality neither party had died, and the fate of the planet still hung in the balance. She caught herself wondering if Asch was thinking the same thing. No, Natalia immediately reconsidered; she knew by the look on his face that his thoughts were nowhere near such a mundane topic as reminiscing.

"Continue thinking so hard and you'll walk yourself right off the ledge," Natalia said teasingly. She was rewarded when her fiancé betrayed his surprise for a split second before responding with a sly smile.

"Don't worry, unlike some people I can accomplish both thinking and walking at the same time."

Almost as if on cue, Natalia heard Luke shout as he nearly tripped over a stray rock along the path. She couldn't resist a giggle. At least Tear had her hand in his, and unlike her boyfriend she could talk and still keep them from taking a nasty tumble.
Asch hopped down a small ledge and offered Natalia his hand. She took it and even once she'd leapt down herself, she kept her grip and was rewarded when he gently squeezed her hand back. The gesture warmed her heart, reminded her of the days when the two of them hadn't been unlike her best friend and cousin were now. Young, infatuated, back when they'd first seen each other as something other than a childhood friend; so many lazy afternoons together, so many beautiful times that she had never appreciated properly. The little reminders of those simple times made her want it all back. She wanted all of this to finally be over; she wanted to have a life with her friends, her family and her fiancé again.

"You look like something is bothering you," Asch noted. Natalia laughed. "What?"

"I've been trying to figure out how to ask you that all day, and here you're the one asking me," she replied still chuckling.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh come now Asch, you can't honestly say nothing is bothering you. It's written all over your face these past weeks. There's something on your mind you haven't been able to figure out."

"And if I said it was really nothing-"

"Then I'd say you were a liar," Natalia declared. "I've spent the last eight years figuring out how to tell when something is bothering you, because Lorelei knows it would kill you to actually tell me," she said slyly, her smile killing any malice that might have otherwise resided in such a statement. "And to be fair, I should warn you, if this keeps up I might have to sic Luke on you. He has enough cheer for all of us these days." Asch chuckled but didn't offer any kind of reply; if anything, what little cheer he had diminished.

"I know enough to tell there's something there," Natalia continued more softly. "Whether I find out what it is, whether you let me in to help you deal with it... that decision resides with you.

Asch pulled Natalia's hand closer until their shoulders touched, and the gesture unexpectedly set Natalia's heart racing. She missed their closeness, the small gestures that reminded her how dear she was to him; even the silence they shared in that brief moment left her at ease. Asch let a chuckle escape.

"You know..." he began. "For once I think I actually wish I could tell you everything; I wish I could just let it all out; I wish there was someone who could help me with this..."

"Asch, whatever it is, we can do it together. I may not be able to do more than listen, but I'm sure we can find a way to solve whatever problem you may have. If I've learnt nothing else this past year, it's that nothing is impossible. Think of all we've accomplished! Two years ago we'd have called it sheer lunacy, but we've done it all the same."

"This isn't something like that at all. This is something that can't be changed, and to be honest if I could change it, I probably wouldn't," Asch confessed. "There's nothing I've done that has brought things to this point that I would want to undo. It's just... something I have to come to terms with. And I have to come to terms with it on my own... otherwise it's meaningless."

Natalia looked long and hard at her fiancé. She studied his gaze, the depths of his green eyes, the sharpness of his features framed by his blood red hair; at first he continued to watch the terrain, but noticing her attention he questioningly observed her scrupulous stare.

"It's Luke, isn't it?" She finally concluded.
"What?" Asch blurted, completely caught off guard by her statement.

She smiled; her satisfied expression told the young monarch that she mistook his surprise as an attempt to conceal the truth. "No really, what?" Asch repeated.

"You're still feeling uneasy about Luke being in a relationship with Tear, aren't you?" Natalia elaborated.

"I am not!" Asch fired back a little too quickly to sound remotely credible. His shouting turned a few heads, but when Asch shot them all an annoyed glare, everyone kept on walking, including the unknowing subjects of the conversation.

"Really now, there's no reason to be ashamed of such a thing; after all, you've always been over-protective of Luke," the princess continued once Luke and Tear were out of an earshot. "In fact, most of us are surprised that you've taken it so quietly; your intervention in Grand Chokmah notwithstanding of course."

Asch stared at his fiancée in disbelief, unsure whether to be relieved that she'd latched onto something so far from the truth or insulted that she'd think he had problems with Luke being with Tear. And besides! He wasn't over-protective! Sure, maybe he kept an extra close eye on his little brother, but that's what big brothers did. Luke definitely got into enough trouble to warrant an extra pair of eyes. Lorelei knows his sibling could find trouble easier than a fish could find water.

And it wasn't like he was out of line for feeling annoyed that Luke had barely said five words to him since Grand Chokmah; it wasn't like Luke had never met Tear before. He could stand to make a little bit of time for his own family! Even Guy had barely been able to get two words in with him. It was one thing to have a girlfriend, but the way he'd been dropped like a rock grated his nerves.

None of that added up to his being over-protective; Natalia was barking up the completely wrong tree. So why was she still looking at him like that?

"What?" Asch asked.

"Say it," Natalia prodded.

"Say what?"

"That you're being silly and over-protective."

"I'm not! I'm not being over-protective, and I'm completely fine with Luke and Tear being together."

"Is that so?"

"Yes!"

"Then why is it you've barely let them out of eyesight since we left Grand Chokmah?"

"Well... that's..."

"Earshot as well, if I recall correctly," she continued. "You're always nearby; even when we stopped overnight you volunteered to help them gather wood for the fire. Why is that?"

"That's because..." Asch struggled but failed to come up with a reason on the spot.

"My, my," Natalia giggled. "Asch, struck speechless? What has this world come to?"
"Shut up," he mumbled, hating that the more she spoke the more he was realizing how right she was.

Okay... so maybe he wasn't as okay with Luke and Tear as he'd thought. He was just worried though... and what was so wrong with that? He was worried about where they would go, and what was inevitably going to come at the end of their relationship. He was afraid of the inevitable pain, and it was inevitable given their fate; Luke feared what he would do to Tear, but Asch knew that Luke would suffer doubly. He still didn't understand why Luke had done what he had done; why had he started something that he knew was only going to bring him misery?

But more than all of that, Asch realized, he was afraid of losing Luke. He was already a third wheel to his little brother, what was going to come next? How long before Luke didn't even care if they saw each other, before they didn't speak for weeks without Luke even noticing? Before he would have to watch his little brother in a separate world, completely happy without him?

Part of Asch had always known this day would come, part of him knew that Luke wouldn't stay his baby brother forever, that he would have to grow up someday. That part of him had felt it more and more as he watched Luke fend for himself, watched him grow up in a world that kept denying him. Deep down he'd known Luke was no longer the child that clung to his sleeve, the child that looked to him to make the world right; and deep down he'd realized that someday they would have to go their separate ways. Asch just didn't want to accept it. He didn't want to accept that there was a life that didn't have Luke by his side, where he didn't see his sibling on a regular basis, but he couldn't deny it anymore. He hadn't been able to since the days in Baticul after their first visit here. The days when he'd realized that Luke didn't have a place in his world, and neither did he want one. Maybe that's really why he pushed Luke away; maybe that's why he ran. But no matter how far he fled, he never escaped that daunting reality. A hole had been ripped in his chest; he felt bare and empty in a void that threatened to swallow him. Now, with both their death's looming over his mind, a cold numbness clung to him, and no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't shake it.

Yet, as he stood there on the edge of a precipice, he felt the warmth of Natalia's hand in his, the gentle weight of her head as she rested it against his shoulder. No, he wasn't alone, was he? He had Natalia; he had all his friends. They'd spent so long telling him, but only now was he finally starting to believe it.

He wasn't alone.

Somehow it only dulled the sting of Luke's recent negligence. He couldn't help feeling a little betrayed by it all; and maybe it was because he was used to being spoiled. He was so used to talking to Luke on a regular basis; to having that much closer of a relationship that now they seemed so distant, even if their interaction was still as much as any two siblings might have. But he couldn't share those feelings with Luke, and he wouldn't let himself resent Tear for it either; he had to come to terms with it, in his own way. He let out a single chuckle. Leave it to Natalia to figure out a problem he didn't even realize he had.

"What?" Natalia asked.

"I was just thinking you're probably right," he confessed. "Maybe I have been a bit overprotective; and a bit spoiled without realizing it."

"Don't be hard on yourself; it's nothing to be ashamed of. You should be proud that you and Luke are so close that you have such feelings."

"I guess. I just worry about him."
"We all do," Natalia replied with a giggle. "You're not the only one who's been in earshot the past few days." Natalia nodded her head at the blond who was tailing Luke and Tear pretty efficiently.

"I worry about his timing," Asch corrected her. "I wonder if this was really the right time for him to take that step with her, with everything going on, and not knowing how things will end..." Or **knowing exactly how things will end.**

"It's because it's a time like this," Natalia answered. "It's these times that we need to embrace and hold onto such feelings. When the world is unstable and the future uncertain, we need to remember all those things that make life worthwhile. Because when things are at their worst... that is what will remind us what we are living for."

"What we're living for, huh?" Asch repeated softly.

"Indeed," Natalia smiled, pulling herself closer. "I'm finding more and more reasons every day."

Largo sat patiently; nothing but the whirring of the Planet Storm and the clinkering of his men's armour reached his ears, but neither sound sufficed to break the almost meditative state he was in. It had been days that he'd stood in wait; though the passage of time was indecipherable here. He counted its passing as his men alternated shifts, each new round bringing food and supplies to those who remained in the core. If his enemies were smart, they would simply cut off the supply route; he who couldn't, no, who didn't dare leave on his honour as a warrior, would starve until he was too weak to defend that which he had been sent to protect.

But the Black Lion knew his foes would do no such thing. Though the Necromancer might have it in him to conceive such a plan, it would never be brought to fruition. They had precious little time, and like he in this foreign and ancient place, they had no ability to decipher exactly how much of their valuable time was already spent. His enemies, who could not afford such a costly plan, would face him head on and the God-General would have it no other way.

This was his final mission; should he stand victorious or be defeated, it would end here; appropriate seeing as here was where it began. Here Yulia had started the chain of events that would birth such a bloody and meaninglessly cruel existence, that had led them all to this place, and here was where he would cut that chain. Ironic, or perhaps simply inevitable; he didn't particularly care which. In the end even he was a slave to the destiny he'd sworn to crush.

Faint sounds from above alerted Largo to the presence of his foes long before they would come into sight. There was no scheduled change of forces for several more hours; there was no mistaking the sounds of battle as the few monsters he'd allowed to roam served their purpose as alarms. Largo brought himself to his feet and the men who were not so perceptive as their commander took to arms. Many looked nervously about, searching for an enemy they wouldn't see for several minutes yet, while others moved to hide in ambush. Largo immediately called them out. No tricks, no traps, no ambush; just his strength against theirs. Perhaps he was being foolishly naive, but if this was how it ended, it would end on his own terms.

He was well rewarded by the suspicious, almost surprised looks on his foes' faces when they arrived. Shocked to see him standing in their way? He doubted it; most likely surprised that they didn't perceive any hidden forces, suspicious of where an ambush may lay in wait, escaping their notice. Only one person seemed certain that there was no one lying in wait, and the Princess' fierce gaze met his own in a fiery challenge. The familiarity of that fire flashed a pang of regret but one that was quickly discarded. He'd no time for reminiscing about the past. Today was about the future.
"I'd expect as much of the Black Lion," Natalia was the first to speak. "Your honour speaks well of you, though your cause does otherwise."

"You forget that history is written by the victor," Largo replied. "Whether a man is a hero or a villain is determined only by whether he fought for the side that conquered. What is right and what is wrong is merely a matter of perspective."

"Indeed," Jade agreed, "such is the way of the world, or perhaps it is merely the way of humanity."

"That is a weak excuse," Largo countered. "To say it is in the nature of things is no different than dismissing it as the Score or the Planet's Memory; it all boils down to an inevitability that no matter how hard you fight against it, will not alter its course."

"I refuse to believe that is true," Natalia shot back. "People's choices, their struggles, their efforts, they mean something! It is not merely futile struggling against an inevitable fate. Their choices will decide their future."

"Choices are meaningless if the result is pre-determined. If no path will lead to another outcome then the ability to make decisions is no more than an illusion to hide from people how enslaved they are. The only way for people to regain their independence is to eliminate the world bound to the Planet's Memory and create a new one that is truly free."

"How can you know that for sure?" Tear challenged. "How can you be so sure that all possible choices are pre-determined? How can you know there is no way to find a different future? Look at Luke, he was never in the Score to begin with and yet here we are. Maybe we've already deviated from the path of destruction Yulia foretold."

"That is meaningless," Largo replied. "The Score is simply a small part of the Planet's Memory, translated into human words. You ask me to prove things are pre-determined, but in the same breath I could ask you to prove they are not. I have seen the inevitability of the Planet's Memory. I was there the day I saw the myth of free will shatter before me."

Jade sighed as the verbal banter passed back and forth, warily eyeing the God-General's men. While Largo himself may be valiant, that didn't mean the same of his soldiers and the Necromancer still wasn't entirely convinced that there weren't any reinforcements waiting in the many crevices surrounding them. The soldiers were uneasy, clearly uncertain what to make of their commander's debate with his foes and the longer this drew out, the more likely one of the Oracle Knights would take the chance to eliminate one of them.

While he could appreciate his friends' attempts to sway the God-General's ideals, and Jade would give them points for choosing Largo as he seemed the least attached to Van's ideals, he knew that they wouldn't succeed. There was far more to his story than they knew, for the path Largo was on was not one traveled on a whim; that he was still standing here, trusted enough by Van to guard this Passage Ring with his life, was proof he was deeply connected with the cause.

"Free choice isn't meaningless," Asch continued, garnishing an even deeper sigh from the Colonel. "That's nothing but a pathetic excuse for people who made the wrong choices. To say that no matter what you do you'll have the same result, that's only one more reason people use to not have to put any effort into something, or to have to care about anything."

"You're naive and foolish," Largo replied. "You know nothing of loss and of pain."

"Try me," Asch fired, his eyes narrowing. How dare Largo think that he knew the first damn thing about him. "I know plenty about losing everything, about having every last thing you care about
ripped away and then shoved in your face for reasons you can't even begin to fathom. It might be unfair, but to blame the world and watch it burn is just as bad."

"I wonder if you would still be saying the same thing if you hadn't had all those things you cared for returned to you," Largo challenged. "I had a family once, a wife that I cared for more than anything. The Score told us that we should, no, that we must have a child. We rejoiced, and welcomed a beautiful baby girl. But one day, I returned home from a job and both were missing."

The tension in the room was palpable; the Oracle Knights shuffled nervously, as did Natalia and her companions, but Largo continued without notice or pause.

"Our daughter was gone, and after losing her my wife went hysterical. They found her body floating in the bay a few days later. In a single day I lost everything that mattered to me. Why tell us to have a child only to lose her? And then to drive my wife to such sorrow as to kill herself... I refused to accept it; I hated the Score, the Planet's Memory. Tell me then, since you think you have all the answers. What should have been done? Where was our choice? What could have been done to prevent such a tragedy? What decision could have led away from that path?"

"Free will means nothing," Largo stated. "All ends are the same and so choices are meaningless. This world will be eternally trapped. If it is our fate to be doomed to tragedy and destruction, then at least we will leave behind a world that can make its own future in our wake."

"You're wrong," Luke retorted. "Even if the ends are the same, our choices do mean something! Life isn't about where it ends; it's about the journey you take to get there. You can choose to be happy, or you can choose to be sad and live in regret. Even if you will end up in the same place, I refuse to believe that the path you take to get there is meaningless. People don't live to die; they live for all the experiences and memories that they create along the way. I'm sorry that you lost your wife and your daughter, and you're right, their deaths were sad and it seems cruel that they had to die so young, but does that make the lives they lived worthless? Does that mean that all the times they shared with you, all those days you were happy together mean nothing at all?"

Luke felt the air brush against his face as Natalia's arrow flew at her target. Largo easily knocked the shot from the air, the arrow crumpling under the impact of his heavy armour. Spinning around in shock, Luke saw Natalia standing firm, her bow still aimed, her hand frozen where it had loosed the arrow.

"I will acknowledge your resolve, Largo the Black Lion," Natalia declared.

A faint grin spread across Largo's face as he readied his massive weapon. "And I will yours," he replied.

"Natalia! What are you-"

"Don't, Luke," Asch cut his sibling off. "She's right. Largo has his right to fight for what he believes. Neither of us will stand down, so we'll let the outcome of this battle decide."

Largo swung his huge scythe warningly, his resolve written on every inch of his face. "Will you be the heroes or the villains of this story we've begun? Face me and decide!"

The entire room burst to life as the frozen soldiers rushed forward to meet them. Luke met the first with his sword, parrying a strike before driving his blade through an opening in his enemy's armour. Crimson ran down the sword as the soldier crippled in front of him. Luke was suddenly
reminded of the first time he'd killed someone, back all those days ago on the Tartarus; it made him sad to realize how easy delivering death came to him now.

Luke had to be quick on his feet to avoid Largo's scythe. The blade came down over his head and a few hairs flew loose as he narrowly dodged the strike. Luke was quick to put a bit more distance between himself and the God-General but was impeded by a second soldier. To his left Jade was contending with another two soldiers that were keeping him too occupied to cast his artes. Asch and Tear were engaged with another few men, leaving Guy, Anise and Natalia to try and occupy Largo.

If there was an up-side to having to contend with half a platoon of Oracle Knights, it was that their presence was preventing the God-General from sweeping his huge scythe across the relatively small battlefield. With the power to cleave someone in two, it wasn't something Luke wanted to be blindsided by. Unfortunately, as more and more of the God-General's men were falling, Largo was getting more and more liberal with his weapon and the battle grew harder and harder.

Natalia cursed under her breath as arrow after arrow bounced harmlessly off Largo's armour. She simply couldn't find an opening; his thick metal armour covered every inch of his body except for his face, but a direct attack was easily deflected. She wasn't the only one on the battlefield struggling either, no one had landed a solid hit on their foe and she'd already needed to tend to multiple injuries on their part.

The young princess felt her bow quivering in her hands; she forced them to be still, but that only spurred the trembling and the nauseated feeling in the pit of her stomach. She wasn't at her limit, far from it; what shook within her was her resolve, her desire to fight this battle. She didn't want to do this, to be here, to be fighting...

Natalia remembered the feeling, the sick, nauseated feeling she'd had the night she'd finally decided to clean up the stray locket she'd picked up. True, she had never given much thought as to whose it might be other than her Aunt's; it seemed to be the obvious conclusion, Choral Castle was their vacation home. Not once had she expected to find a picture of herself carefully tucked away within. A picture of a baby girl and the woman her nanny had identified as Sylvia, her birth mother. On the back of the picture in messy writing were the words 'Meryl' and a date only a few days before the day she had always called her birthday. That same locket still sat in her pocket, weighing more than were it made of solid lead.

At first Natalia hadn't known what to believe, unsure which was worse, to believe that Largo had dropped it, or that Mohs had. But even the former Scorer in Baticul could tell her that Mohs had been with the Order in Daath his entire life, and her nanny surely would have known if her birth father had been a man of the Order. Having heard Largo speak, however, had confirmed it beyond any doubt and it was that knowledge that had Natalia's heart quivering. Never had she felt so alone in the middle of the battlefield, never had she been so unsure about what to do.

Jade scowled, adjusting the target of his arte at the last second. The energy blast exploded in the scythe's path, sending it off course and only a few inches short of the Princess who stood in shock on the battlefield.

"Natalia!" Asch was quick to turn his attention towards her, all while sending a grateful gesture at the Necromancer. But before he'd gotten halfway across the platform, Natalia quickly arched her bow and sent an arrow flying at the God-General's face, forcing him to shift his attack to block the strike and away from her distracted fiancé.

Natalia took a deep breath as she notched another arrow and sent it flying through the neck of the last remaining Oracle Knight. She barely noticed Tear nod in thanks, her entire mind was suddenly
focused on a single thing, and that was the fact that she couldn't afford to be defeated here. She had kept everything to herself, shouldered the burden in silence all for this moment, this single chance to face down the God-General and confront him face-to-face about his choices. If the others had known, they'd never have let her come, but she had to. She couldn't keep running from her past forever; she had to stand tall and face it, and she wasn't about to give up now.

With Natalia's mind back on matters at hand, Jade returned his full attention to the problem before them. He dismissed whatever had suddenly distracted the Princess, a matter for another time; for the time being it would take some quick thinking to come out of this encounter unscathed enough to perform an inquisition. The problem was obvious: the God-General's thick armour was impervious to almost all of their attacks. It was solidly built, and any other man would have collapsed under the sheer weight of the materials from which it was forged, but not the Black Lion. His strength and stamina were formidable to say the least. There was also the other small problem of his weapon. Its range had tripled with the defeat of his last remaining allies, leaving them expending most of their energy trying to avoid it. The chances of getting in close enough to land a killing blow with sword or spear were slim. Natalia's arrows and Tear's knives had little power against his defences and they were running out of energy.

Even Jade's vast arsenal of artes was proving of little use. Wind artes were useless, and lightning based artes didn't faze the God-General either, meaning his armour was insulated so as not to conduct electricity. Luke and Asch had taken to fire based artes, a clever strategy but one that wasn't working well either. In theory the flames should heat the metal, making it unbearably hot for their opponent, but not only did Largo's stamina seem to extend to sweltering heat, he could see through their plan and refused to give them the time to cast.

Guy and Anise continued their physical assault, trying to act as distractions while not getting themselves killed. Tear and Natalia turned their attention to the task of keeping the cannon fodder as injury-free as they could. Anise tried some of her light and darkness based artes but was only rewarded when the God-General charged her head on. Guy took the hit, the scythe's pole landing cleanly in his stomach, knocking him breathless and sending him flying clear across the room, dangerously close to the cliff face. Natalia immediately fled to his side and pulled him from danger.

There had to be some way, some weakness the Necromancer hadn't considered. There were openings in the armour to allow for movement, but it was constructed narrowly and angled so no blade could easily penetrate without a few moments to line up the strike. If only there were a way to widen the holes, to create a target that could be reached, or better, that could be hit from a distance. Luke's arte went off, sending a shower of flames down over the God-General. The armour glowed red where the sparks landed, which began to fade as soon as they'd struck. Luke narrowly avoided a hit with the massive blade, but took a check from Largo himself that had the boy down for the count. Anise rushed in to draw Largo away, for that's all her reckless assault would do, no matter how hard the girl tried to aim for the dull red areas lingering on the armour. That's when Jade got an idea.

"Asch!" Jade summoned the future monarch's attention from his ailing sibling and, with no more than a quick nod, conveyed his plans to the fiery young noble. Really, when had he trained the boy so thoroughly? A half second later, Asch had launched another fire-based arte that, like his sibling, crashed harmlessly against the thick armour.

But this time Jade was not so easily dissuaded and his own fire arte exploded not a second after Asch's had, striking Largo from behind as he'd turned to attack Asch. Allowing himself to become distracted, Largo turned again and Asch's arte struck right where Jade's had, intensifying the red hot glow of the thick metal. Largo was not so easily fooled twice, and this time his attention
remained on the Necromancer who was well into casting. Tear loosed a light based arte inches from the God-General's face; he stumbled backwards a few steps and was hit by two more artes.

"You're wasting your energy," Largo stated. "I've endured temperatures greater than you could imagine. This is nothing!"

"You would have, wouldn't you, Badaq?" Natalia challenged, returning to the battlefield. Guy still looked a bit unsteady from the hit and held back a bit.

The foreign name seemed to catch the God-General by surprise, and neither Jade nor Asch missed the chance to land another set of artes on him. He tried to retaliate but it was clear the heat was slowing him somewhat.

"How do you know that name?" Largo demanded.

"You lived in Baticul with your wife and child," she replied. "You worked as a mercenary escorting caravans across the desert to Chesedonia. There are some who still remember you," Natalia finished, throwing something at the man that glittered in the light of the passage rings. "It wasn't difficult to learn when knowing what to ask."

Largo swung around, catching the item Natalia had tossed but the opening allowed Asch and Jade to land another clean hit. "I see," Largo replied. He swung at Jade but was intercepted by Tokunaga who knocked the weapon off course. The God-General took another hit. "I thought I'd lost this, but I see now how you learned so much. Then you must know why your foolish fire will never defeat me."

An evil smirk spread across Asch's face as he finally put together the entirety of Jade's plan. Jade confirmed it with a smirk of his own. "Who said anything about defeating you with fire?" Asch asked. Largo's eyes widened as he realized what they were doing.

Both Asch's icicle rain and Jade's splash arte struck Largo's red hot armour sending plumes of steam into the air as the freezing water collided with the piping hot armour. A massive crack echoed across the cavern as the rapidly shrinking metal split across Largo's back. "Anise! Now!"

Asch yelled.

Tokunaga charged in, one of its huge arms pounding the metal right along the crack and splitting the entire back open. Without wasting a second, Asch charged in. His sword flashed as it reflected the light surrounding them; darting behind the God-General, he aimed for the opening.

"Fools," Largo swung around, catching both Anise and Asch with his scythe. Their lives were spared only because he'd swung around the opposite way and it was the back of the scythe that connected, but it in no way spared them the blow. Asch went flying into Jade, narrowly missing the Necromancer, just as Anise took out Tear. "Don't think you've won just yet."

"Don't touch him!" Luke charged.

"Luke, no!" Tear screamed as Largo raised his scythe.

But the blade never fell. Frozen with the colossal weapon in the air Largo looked over his shoulder to see a single arrow sticking out of his back. A second arrow was notched and the proud God-General could do no more than watch as Natalia launched it, her fiery eyes betraying a hint of sorrow. Largo felt the arrow pierce his heart.

"That was... an excellent shot... Meryl."
Largo collapsed onto the ground, blood beginning to pool and stain the glyphs below him red. Natalia's hand trembled as she lowered her bow. Around her she heard the hustle of Tear tending to Asch. Anise being on Tokunaga seemed to have escaped most of the damage, but all Natalia could really register was the sight of the dead God-General lying in front of her.

"Meryl?" Anise's voice drew Natalia from her daze. "I wonder who the heck Meryl was."

"Maybe it was the name of his wife," Tear suggested. "Natalia, you seem to know quite a bit about him."

"Yeah! What's with that? And what's with that thing you tossed him halfway through the fight?"

"N-Nothing," Natalia shook her head, trying to clear it. "I just thought it might distract him. I'm sure Meryl must have been his wife; he loved her so much as to go this far for her memory, she must have been dear to him." She caught Asch's eye and could see that he was sceptical of her explanation. She must look worse than she thought, but she was grateful when he made no move to call her on it.

"Shouldn't we get moving?" Natalia spoke up to distract from the expectant looks she was getting. "We've still got a Planet Storm to put a halt to, do we not?"

"We do," Tear agreed, not being one to miss Natalia's attempts to dismiss the issue, but going along with her all the same. "Let's get moving."

"I don't care what you say, Luke," Anise argued. "That was unbelievably anti-climactic."

"What were you expecting?" Guy asked.

"I don't know, more lights, more flashing, something!" The former Guardian threw her hands in the air. "I mean this is the fonon flow that supports our way of life; you'd think turning the damn thing off would be a bit more exciting."

"Well, I'll be certain to direct your complaint to Yulia next time I speak with her," Jade stated. "Boooo, you're no fun Colonel!" Anise stuck her tongue out and everyone erupted into laughter.

As much as he laughed at it now, Asch almost agreed with Anise in that the process of shutting off the Planet Storm had been surprisingly simple and almost dull considering all the effort it had taken to get there. Luke had taken the Jewel of Lorelei into the fonic glyph they'd found below the Passage Ring, and the entire thing had dispelled. They'd waited a few moments to recover and to make sure the flow of fonons had stopped and that was it. Now here they were, on the way back to the Albiore. Not that Asch would be caught dead complaining about it. It was nice to have something go off without a hitch for once; maybe that's why it was so easy to laugh about it all.

Still, there was one person who wasn't laughing, someone who had seemed off since they'd defeated Largo, and Natalia's sudden change of demeanour had Asch puzzled. It bothered him that he didn't know why she was so upset, but since she'd the courtesy to confront him alone about his moodiness, the least he could do was afford her the same courtesy. But as his mind raced through all the possibilities, the Albiore couldn't come into sight fast enough.

"Natalia," Asch gently placed a hand on the Princess' shoulder once they'd boarded. "Can I talk to you for a bit?"

"Of course," Natalia replied. Asch shook his head when she looked at him, expecting him to
"I think it'd be better if we spoke alone," he added. The Albiore's engine's roared to life and the sudden jerk of the takeoff sent Natalia stumbling into Asch's arms. She flashed a weak apologetic smile and Asch surprised her by kissing her cheek. The impulse made Natalia blush. Once the Albiore was steady and in the air, Asch opened the door to his cabin and the couple sat down on the edge of the bed together.

"Natalia, what's wrong?" Asch asked.

"Nothing's wrong," Natalia replied. "I guess I'm just tired after such an intense battle."

"You're lying," Asch said bluntly. "Just like this morning, you said you know when something's wrong, well the same goes for me. Whether you tell me what's wrong, that's your choice, but don't sit there and say that there's nothing."

Tears came unbidden to the Princess' face and the sound of her own words broke down the little resolve she had left. "It's just... it's all so..."

"Natalia, what is it?"

"It's Largo... he..."

"Don't worry about him, he's gone now."

"No that's not it!" Natalia's voiced rose unexpectedly. "The daughter he kept talking about... the one that drove his wife to kill herself, the one that drove him to this point... it was me. He was my birth father, Asch."

"Natalia, what are you talking about? You couldn't be Largo's daughter, didn't you hear him? His daughter died."

"No, Asch. He said his daughter was taken from him, that he lost her; he never said that she died! The real Princess was stillborn, remember? I was taken from my family and given to the Queen as a replacement for the daughter she'd lost."

"But... how can you be sure?" Asch asked.

"That thing I tossed to him, during the fight..."

"Yeah, what about it?"

"I found it at Choral Castle when we fought him and Sync. I saw a locket in the mud and thought it was Aunt Suzanne's so I picked it up... but inside was a picture of my mother holding me as a newborn."

"But you still can't be sure that it was his," Asch pointed out.

"The name on the back of the picture was 'Meryl'. He said it again down there, he called me Meryl. That was what they'd named me... That was how I found out about him. I searched the birth records at the castle, investigated from there. I'm sorry I never said anything, I simply... I had to figure everything out for myself."

"Still, why didn't you say something? We could have tried to work things out; figured out some way for you to talk to him. You shouldn't have had to-"
"No! Don't you get it? I was afraid! I didn't want that! I didn't want to get to know him; I didn't want to acknowledge he was really my father. I was scared that if I got to know him... that I would hurt father, that I would grow distant from all of you. I didn't want to hesitate." Tears began to fall from her eyes.

Asch put his arm around Natalia and pulled her closer. "You idiot," he said sadly. "You should hesitate. There's nothing wrong with that; you shouldn't be able to point a bow at your family and fire with no regret."

"No... I can't- I couldn't afford to hesitate. The world, all of you, it's too important to me to risk losing. We've come too far, lost too many people to give up now. There was no other way."

"Then why are you crying?" Asch asked, barely louder than a whisper.

"I just..." Natalia broke down completely, losing herself in Asch's arms.

"I just wish... I had tried harder to stop him," she sobbed.

"Shhhh," Asch said gently, rocking Natalia comfortingly in his arms.

Without saying a word, Asch sat there, letting Natalia cry; pour out all her regrets until the dull hum of the Albiore's engine and the warmth of his arms lulled the Princess to sleep.
Mercy on the Battlefield

A cold wind blew across the open field where the twin Albiores slept, sending a shiver across Asch's shoulders as he pulled his cloak tighter and inched closer to the fire he'd constructed. The moon over his head was a clear testament that he should heed the calls of his warm bed aboard the nearby airship, but instead he remained seated before the crackling flames.

Everyone had protested when he suggested setting up a campfire outside, and he couldn't entirely blame them. It had been cold even before the sun had set, and the temperature had only dropped from there. Asch hadn't really cared if anyone would join him though; he just wanted to escape the Albire's confines. For some reason he found it much more stifling than usual and the claustrophobic atmosphere drove him outside in spite of his friend's sceptical glances. It was much better under the open sky, and with the fire he'd quickly constructed, he was comfortable enough.

Whatever had him feeling stuffed up inside the Albire must have infected everyone else, because one by one they all came out to join him. Even Noelle arrived as scheduled and joined them around the fire. The blonde pilot had come at their request and was going to accompany them to the Radiation Gate. Once they shut off the Planet Storm and disabled Eldrant's defences, they would need to do a lot of very rapid organizing of both countries' militaries. Preparations were already underway, but based on the timelines both rulers had given him, and the pace their own group was moving, it would still be at least a week or two before they would be ready to attack.

It was almost hard to believe that they were so close... so near their goal that Asch could actually envision the outcome. After more than a year of challenges and of tests, not all of which he passed; it was all coming down to this one final confrontation. That he could handle, all the weight and responsibility that encompassed the final clash of Van's beliefs against their hope for the future could be dealt with; it was what would come after that Asch couldn't handle.

Asch stared at the crackling fire, missing the company of his friends who had all retreated back inside by this point. He didn't really want anyone to talk to so much as he just missed the comforting presence of another human being sitting nearby. It was so unlike him; normally solitude brought him comfort, now it was those moments when he was alone that all the dark thoughts he tried to escape would resurface.

"You still sitting out here all by yourself?" A voice asked from the shadows. A hint of a grin whispered across Asch's face.

"No, I'm sitting out here with Peony and all his rappigs, you idiot," Asch shot back. Luke emerged from the darkness still chuckling and sat down across from his sibling, inching closer to the fire until he was comfortable. "What has you out here?"


"I just figured you'd stay inside with Tear," Asch said with a shrug. He poked the fire with a twig wondering what really brought his sibling out here. Lorelei knew it must be something monumental to tear him away from his girlfriend.


"That would be a first," Asch muttered under his breath.

"What was that?"
"Nothing," Asch dismissed.

"I don't want to know what you said; I want to know what it was about." Luke demanded somewhat angrily. "I was trying to be nice and keep you company, what's your problem all of a sudden?"

"Maybe because that's the most you've spoken to anyone but Tear in a week," Asch shot before thinking. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he wished he could retract them. "I'm not the only one, you know," he continued in a calmer tone, determined to recover and not mislead Luke into thinking he had anything against Tear. He knew damn well it was probably the first thing that jumped into his sibling's mind. "Natalia, Anise... especially Guy, we're all kind of wondering when you'll remember we still exist too."

Luke opened his mouth but hesitated and thought about his reply a little longer. "I guess I have been kind of distant lately, huh?" He asked, directing his question more towards the fire at his feet than the sibling sitting across from it.

"Just a little," Asch shot teasingly, trying to lighten Luke's spirits. Why did he always have to ruin a good moment over such petty little things?

"I don't know... it's just that I-"

"You don't have to explain yourself," Asch cut him off. "It's okay, I remember what it's like."


"You didn't take to well with my spending time with Natalia at first either, you know."

"I thought you and Natalia had always been together! Like... since you were kids."

"We were," Asch replied. "But it's one thing to be engaged, it's a completely separate thing to be in love. We've always been friends, but there was a point when it turned into something more than that. So yes, I remember what it's like to be newly in love and let's be honest, you didn't like it. So don't give me attitude about not enjoying being Tear's and your third wheel."

"Hey, I wasn't that bad!"

"So you don't remember sneaking out of the manor to sabotage our date?"

"No!" Luke protested. Asch cocked an eyebrow. "Okay, maybe a little... I remember hurting myself... and I think we were down in the harbour."

"Bingo."

"Okay fine, so I didn't handle it well. At least I was too young to know better."

"You weren't that young."

"Neither are you," Luke shot back.

"At least try," Asch said more seriously. "We're your family and friends too. I know Tear is important to you, and that the two of you are really close, but you have to find a balance."

"I will, thanks Asch..." Silence fell over the siblings. "So," Luke finally spoke up. "You ready to talk about what's really bothering you?"
"What's that supposed to mean?" Asch asked suspiciously.

"Oh come on, we both know you only get angry about stupid things when something else is bugging you."

"So ignoring your friends is only a stupid little thing to you?"

"Come on Asch," Luke insisted. "Now you're avoiding the topic; I'm not that dense."

Asch raised an eyebrow.

"Anymore," Luke amended with a mock scowl. Asch scoffed but there was an unmistakable look of defeat in his eyes, a weariness that tread deeper than Luke wanted to know. He had to know, though; as Asch's little brother, as his family and his support, it was Luke's job to see the things no one else noticed. He was starting to understand that more and more lately... as he continued to learn just how silently Asch knew how to suffer.

"I don't understand you anymore," Asch said quietly. "I always thought I knew you... better than anyone, sometimes even myself, but I just don't follow. How can you go on like you do? How can you just act like nothing's happening?"

"That makes two of us," Luke shrugged haphazardly with a goofy grin. "I've got no idea what you're going on about."

"Stop that!" Asch's voice rose. "Stop acting all innocent and naive! Damn it all, you just said it yourself, you're not that dense! So stop pretending like the world is all peachy! Don't you get it? We're going to die, Luke! Die! How the hell can you know that and still play around like nothing's wrong!"

Luke fell silent and for a long time the two brothers sat under the night sky, staring at only the fire before them. Then after several tense minutes, a sad smile broke through Luke's solemn expression.

"Remember when I was four and we tried to make that bonfire in the courtyard?" Luke asked.

"What are you talking about?"

"I do," Luke continued. "I'd spent all day trying to gather the dried wood without being noticed. I snuck it one log at a time from the fireplace in the drawing room to your room. You got so mad at me; you spent the next week trying to clean up the bark from your blankets."

"Yes, I remember," Asch conceded grudgingly.

"But you know, that night, when we stacked it all up and lit it, none of that stuff mattered. I remember we tried roasting a snacks over it. I'd never roasted marshmallows before."

Asch chuckled in spite of himself. "I remember you kept burning them one after another. You weren't patient enough not to stick them right in the fire. I had to make them all for you."

"And then Pere came out to see what the commotion was," Luke continued.

"We got into so much trouble," Asch chuckled. "I still remember Father yelling about how we could have burnt down the entire manor."

"But he did put that fire pit in the yard not long afterwards," Luke pointed out.

"That's true; he probably figured we'd try it again if he didn't."
”He was right,” Luke conceded. Asch offered his sibling a fond smile, but the confusion in his eyes was unmistakable; Luke sighed solemnly.

”My point is, when you think back to that time you can remember it two ways: either you remember the fun we had, or you remember Father yelling at us. How you see things is entirely up to you. Yeah we got into a ton of trouble and got grounded for a week but if I had the chance to go back I wouldn't change anything about it. I can still remember... that it's about the good things in life, not the bad ones. Sometimes I think you've forgotten that.”

”That's...” Asch began but trailed off. Deep down he knew how all too true those words were.

”I may smile,” Luke continued, ”but the truth is I'm really scared... no more than that, I'm utterly terrified. The thought of losing everyone is almost more than I can stand; it's enough to make me want to curl up in a corner and never come out again. But that's not how I want to spend the rest of my time, however much I may have. I decided for myself that I'm not going to spend the last of my life worrying about when and how the end will come. If you think about it, everyone has to die someday, so everyone knows they're going to die. It's no different for us, it could be 10, 20 even 50 years before anything happens, we just don't know. So I refuse to stop living because I'm going to die someday.”

”Luke, that's great to think and all but-”

”It's not as complicated as you're trying to make it out to be you know,” Luke cut his sibling off abruptly. ”It all boils down to a simple choice. You can choose to remember the bonfire, or choose to remember the punishment. Happy or miserable: it's your decision. I've made mine.”

Asch sighed deeply, feeling Luke's words weigh down on him more heavily than they ever had in the past. He looked up and found his brother's eyes locked firmly in his gaze. For the first time he felt completely transparent in front of his sibling. Luke was looking right through him.

”What are you going to regret, Asch? The things you did? Or the ones you didn't do?”

”You're strong,” Asch admitted softly, barely a whisper into the night. ”Stronger than I'll ever be...”

”What?”

”Nothing,” Asch dismissed with a shake of his head.

”It didn't sound like nothing,” Luke prodded suspiciously.

”You're imagining things,” Asch shot back.

”Yeah whatever you say.”

Asch sat back, balancing his weight on the stray log that was slowly putting his legs to sleep, and contented himself watching his little brother play with the dying fire. The words spoken played over and over again in his mind.

What are you going to regret? The things you did, or those you didn't do?

When had Luke grown up so much? When had the little boy who once so eagerly clung to Asch's sleeve for dear life become so mature, so completely independent that Asch found himself as the one desperately hanging on? Asch had known it though, slowly watched their roles reversed until he couldn't pretend anymore; it wasn't he who was defending Luke, it was Luke's existence that was keeping him afloat. How long had Asch played on his false sense of superiority? Found
excuses and reasons to keep him in the place he had long since decided was the only one where he belonged anymore... but Asch was no longer just Luke's big brother, and sitting across from him was not someone he had to protect but an equal who was Asch's support as much he was Luke's, maybe even more so. It left him uneasy. Eight years ago he had found himself a place again, a spot in the world that no one else could fill when everything else had been ripped away. If he didn't have that anymore... what did he have left?

Asch feared that answer more than anything.

Still, Asch knew that it wasn't Luke's nonchalance or his lack of attention that had been bothering him; the irritation and anger was directed entirely at himself for not being able to live as wholeheartedly as Luke was. He wanted to smile as his sibling did, to laugh and to go on like everything was normal, but he just couldn't see past the burdens he'd been carrying. No matter what the reason, no matter what excuse he came up with, it didn't change that Luke was right. It was all a choice, and he'd chosen to suffer. It shouldn't be any surprise, wasn't that the same choice he always made? He'd always been the coward and taken the easy way out. Maybe, just maybe, he could find the courage to make the choice Luke had, the decision to simply live.

However, there was still one thing Luke had wrong. Perhaps they didn't know how much time they had left, but Asch wasn't so optimistic as to believe they had years. With all the strength it would take to free Lorelei, and the power they would need to face the challenges ahead, their chances of seeing beyond this journey's end... were very slim.

"Geez!" Anise exclaimed. "And I thought the Absorption Gate was creepy... this place puts creepy on a whole new level!"

"You could say that again," Guy chuckled in agreement, while pulling his cloak a little tighter around him. The Radiation Gate wasn't only eerie, but it was every bit as cold as its counterpart in the north. The blond didn't blame Anise for having the willies; the lighting was minimal at best and it was dead silent making the entire place seem almost haunted. Everyone was on guard against an ambush, forget being worried about how they were going to find their way to the deepest level if it was pitch black inside. To add to it all, everywhere you looked, bones were scattered about, some so small they turned to dust when stepped on, others so large they seemed to be part of the Gate's infrastructure. There were no signs of Dawn Age technology, none of the elegance or beauty that graced Yulia's other creations... if it weren't for the massive amount of fonons radiating into the darkened sky, Guy would have thought they were in the wrong place.

"At least Ginji pulled in a little closer this time," Anise commented. "I just want to get in and get out of here."

"I doubt it's going to be that easy," Jade commented. "Given the forces posted at the Absorption Gate, I expect we will encounter similar resistance here, and with not so honourable a commander."

"Yeah, I guess we're down to either Legretta or Sync," Guy commented.

"It's gotta be Sync!" Anise declared.

"What makes you say that?" Luke asked.

"Oh, that's right, I guess you wouldn't have been there," the dark-haired girl realized. "We ran into Legretta on our way up all those Yulia-be-damned stairs back at the Tower of Rem. She took quite the beating, there's no way she recovered that fast. I mean Asch must have broken three of her ribs."
"At least," Asch confirmed.

"True," Natalia said. "But we also can't rule out the possibility of it being Van himself."

"I somehow doubt that," Jade interjected, adjusting his glasses with his forefinger. "Throughout all of these ordeals, the Commandant has yet to show himself. Our only confirmation that he is, in fact, alive is the words of the God-Generals and Lorelei's message to Asch and Luke."

"Yeah, you're right," Anise realized. "We haven't seen him since he fell into the core. Don't you think that's kind of weird? I mean, he isn't the type to leave all the dirty work to others while he sits pretty on Eldrant. He would get involved when he had to."

"Correct," Jade confirmed. "From this we can draw two possible conclusions: either our actions pose little or no threat to him, or he is unable to risk leaving Eldrant to engage in battle. I suspect it may be the latter, from what Luke has said it sounds as if Lorelei has no intentions of accepting his imprisonment quietly."

"That would leave us with Sync to contend with," Natalia concluded.

"Likely, yes," Jade agreed. "However, we shouldn't completely rule out the possibility of Legretta's presence. Even injured she could serve her purpose from a distance."

"A sniper, huh?" Anise mumbled. "That really doesn't seem her style."

"Her style is whatever will make Van happy," Asch remarked snidely.


"Sorry Tear," Asch added.

"No, it's alright," Tear replied sadly. "You're probably right. Growing up I always saw her as the perfect soldier, but now I understand that there must be more to a person than that, and I've seen her devotion to my brother. She would be willing to do almost anything for his sake... I'm sure that's why she offered to train me when I was young."

"Don't think like that," Luke argued. "She cares about you too. If she didn't she wouldn't have spent so much time trying to get you to change your mind. She doesn't want to fight you any more than you want to fight her."


At the tone of his best friend's voice, Luke immediately fell on the defensive and it wasn't a minute before he spotted what had his former attendant on guard. The entrance to the Radiation Gate was faintly visible in the distance and against the outline of the massive bones piercing up through the earth, Luke spotted the silhouettes of a handful of soldiers.

"How many?" Asch asked.

"Six that are clearly visible," Jade stated his eyes carefully scanning the horizon, "Another three that are only partially visible, and likely five to eight that are hidden."

"So about fifteen give or take?" Anise asked.

"On top of the four behind us!" Asch shouted, spinning around, he and Jade simultaneously unleashed an arte. One of the soldiers was crippled by the twin Thunder blades while his three
friends split up and launched themselves at the group.

"Bet you thought you were being real sneaky!" Anise taunted as one of the remaining Oracle Knights met Tokunaga's arm and fell crippled to the earth. A huge grin spread across her face, satisfied that she'd noticed the hidden soldiers and had been smart enough to actually play along with Asch and the Colonel as they lured them into striking range.

"Watch for the other ones," Guy shouted at Natalia as he dispatched the third soldier. "The noise will draw them."

"We're on it," Natalia and Tear said in unison, both taking off for a higher vantage point while the twins dealt with the last remaining soldier. Natalia raised her bow, focusing on the mass of Oracle Knights that had begun to mobilize. A quick count put their total number at sixteen; was it wrong for her to wish Jade would be wrong once in awhile? How does one give so accurate a count to hidden forces?

"Ready?" Natalia asked, receiving a quick nod and a faint smile from her best friend.

Natalia fired, her arrow whistling through the air, plunging into the neck of the first soldier. Without a moment's hesitation, she grabbed a second arrow and fired again. Her shot missed and a retaliating arrow came sailing her way. The Princess didn't so much as flinch, reaching for another arrow as the enemy's shot crumbled seemingly in midair. Tear's beautiful voice floated through the shimmering air, her shield providing every measure of protection for the archer. Natalia's third shot connected and took out the enemy marksmen.

From her perch, Natalia watched as their forces and the enemy's collided. She could no longer fire in quick succession; each shot had to be carefully aimed so as not to hit her allies, but it didn't appear as if her assistance was direly needed. She could easily see as her companions devastated the enemy forces, an unusual event in and of itself. However, the battle seemed odd somehow different than their usual skirmishes and it took a great deal of effort for Natalia to pin down the source of her unease. It was the lack of hesitation in their opponents, she finally decided. When one of their comrades fell, not a single man so much as bat an eye, they didn't become more aggressive or emotional, they didn't react at all. Either they were a gathering of Daath's most war-hardened individuals, or they lacked an emotional response altogether; judging by their skill level, it was likely the latter and Natalia didn't like the implications of that realization.

"Is everyone alright?" Tear asked, sliding down from the small ledge she and Natalia had been fighting from.

"Yeah," Asch replied. "Doesn't look like anyone was hurt for once."

"Is it just me, or was that whole fight just a little weird?" Anise asked.

"It's not just you," Guy agreed. "Something was different about those Oracle Knights."

"It's because they were replicas," Luke replied.

"What?" Anise shouted.

"Luke's right," Jade concurred. "Their lack of reaction to the deaths of their comrades and lack of emotional response to their worsening situation makes it likely that they were replicas. A human force would at the very least tried to adjust their strategy or would have had some change in their mentality when they were losing."

"Replica soldiers..." Guy muttered once they'd begun moving again. "That explains how Van's
been doing so much with only the rebels that left Daath with him. I was starting to wonder where his endless supply of troops was coming from."

"Is it that hard to fathom? We've known this was likely the case since discovering the facility on Feres Isle," Jade pointed out.

"Yeah, but I didn't want to believe it," the blond replied. "The thought of creating and using replicas like that makes me sick."

"Yes," Natalia said. "The thought of using replicas in such away is a terrifying idea. Can you imagine a war with replicas as soldiers? Where neither army could deplete their reserves? Even if you were to ignore the moral implications, such an event would be a monstrosity."

"Losing lives in war is sad," Luke agreed. "But it's because those precious lives are lost that we hesitate to start wars in the first place. If you take away the consequences... then there would be wars over every little transgression."

"That's why we're never going to let something like that happen," Asch agreed.

"I think there's a lot of work that needs to be done surrounding the existence of replicas to address that matter," Natalia pointed out.

"Someone needs to advocate for the rights of replicas as human beings, not objects," Tear added. "Rules need to be established, with a force in place to enforce those rules."

"Perhaps, but that is something for the future," Jade spoke up. "Might I remind you to keep your minds on the present as to avoid any further ambushes?"

"It is awfully dark in here," Guy agreed, keeping his voice down. Thankfully it wasn't pitch black as he'd feared it might be; the odd fonstone let out an eerie glow, and there was a bright light ahead that lit the cavern pretty effectively. It was probably coming from the Passage Ring itself, and all the glyphs Guy knew would come with it.

So far there was no sign of other soldiers, though Guy wasn't sure if he should take that as a good or a bad sign. All things considered, he'd like to try and get out of here without having to face the same kind of resistance as the Absorption Gate, but he knew that wasn't likely to happen. Taking on a God-General was always risky. They hadn't earned that title for nothing, and Guy was always worried that the next battle they fought wouldn't see all of his friends come out in one piece. One step at a time... that was all they could do. Couldn't hurt to hope though, he supposed.

The Malkuth noble took another scan around the room, while there seemed to be less of the bones and other oddities that had adorned the outer walls, there was no shortage of boulders or other stone structures that littered their path. At one point they had probably been statues, but the elements left them as nothing but unidentifiable rubble. Unfortunately it made the perfect cover for potential enemies. Two large cliff faces ran along their sides, stretching several feet over their heads but not completely touching the ceiling, leaving light to filter through the opening betraying the Passage Ring that couldn't be very far ahead.

It was so faint; Guy dismissed it completely when the glimmer caught his eye, probably one of the glyphs that were now all around them. Just ahead he could see the stairs that led down to the Passage Ring proper and the massive fon machine consumed the entire cavern into which they were about to emerge. He should have noticed it, he should have sensed the danger... but it wasn't until Anise shouted that Guy realized exactly what he'd caught a glimpse of.
The sound of gunfire echoed throughout the cavern. It had been the reflection of light off one of Legretta's guns.

Like the start of a race, the gunshot triggered a flurry of movement that Guy was quick to retreat from. Suddenly a mass of Oracle Knights swarmed around him and the blond was hard-pressed to get on the defensive quickly enough not to wind up injured himself. Anise hadn't been so lucky; the shot landed cleanly in her shoulder. She was a mess, and struggling not to show the pain she was in, but for the extent of the injury, it wasn't half as bad as it would have been if she hadn't pushed Asch out of the way.

Guy saw Natalia quickly move in, swatting away the otherwise hovering monarch who still refused to go any further than on the two girls' defence. With the look in Asch's eyes, Guy was surprised any of the soldiers even dared to try attacking the injured girl, but then he promptly remembered exactly what kind of soldiers they were facing. No amount of killing intent in the world would likely deter them; if one fell, another would replace him... all the more reason to find their boss.

Within the second it took Guy to sort out what had just happened, Jade had cast an arte, erupting from the earth and sending half the cliff face tumbling down into the clearing. The rock slide buried a pair of enemy archers, but the Colonel's true target darted from the falling boulders and skid to the back of the battle area, taking cover behind her forces. Even in those rapid movements, it was obvious Legretta's wounds from their previous battle hadn't healed. She lacked the fluid grace with which she normally moved and her speed was nowhere near that which earned her the title of "Legretta the Quick".

Legretta didn't waste a moment and she'd barely rolled onto her feet before she'd loosed a round at Natalia who was far too busy tending to Anise's injuries to evade. Tear's barrier caught the bullets Asch's sword missed. A second round flew towards the older redhead, but prepared this time, he blocked them all before retaliating with an arte that fell short of its target. The God-General knew her distancing well, and with an ample supply of soldiers to keep her foes at bay, she remained well out of harm's reach.

"Major Legretta!" Tear called out, her voice full of confidence and an authority her former teacher had never heard in her before. "Stand down!"

"I don't recall you having the authority to give me orders," Legretta stated. "You don't honestly believe I would obey such a foolish command? I thought you smarter than that Tear Grants!"

"I'm not ordering you; I'm asking you to please stand down!" The melodist re-iterated. "I don't want to watch anyone else important to me die like Major Cantabile did!"

"If that's the case, then you chose the wrong side!" Legretta answered, firing shots into the fray. Two narrowly missed Guy while the third was blocked by Jade. The Colonel's retaliating arte made it further than Asch's but still fell short of their opponent.

"No, there are people on both sides who are dear to me," Tear explained. "I understand now why you fight, and why you feel you have no other choice. I understand what it's like to stand behind someone who means more to you than the world itself, to want to see them smile more than anything... so I know why your answer will be 'no' no matter what I say to you, but still, I can't accept that we've come to this. I refuse to accept that there is no other choice."

"If you hate the fate that did this, then you know why the Score must be destroyed at all costs, why the Planet's Memory can't be allowed to exist!"

"That's not true! It is because of the choices I've made, the people I've met and the promises I
refuse to break that I've come here. Chance, luck, fate... call it what you will; it has nothing to do with it. For the sake of those dear to me and for all those who have sacrificed so I could come this far, I cannot back down now. If that means that I have to face you, then so be it."

"Well well, it seems you've finally learnt something of value. What changed?"

Tear was silent, flowing with the tide of battle without offering any kind of reply to her mentor. Legretta raised her weapon and fired at Luke. Tear's barrier dropped the bullet midair.

"Someone important to you," Legretta scoffed in realization of the truth she sought. "Are you talking about that worthless replica? Surely you can do better for yourself than a failed replacement."

"Luke is not a failed replacement!" The melodist fired back avidly. "He's not just some creation or experiment meant to serve the purpose my brother decided on for him! He's a person, like you or me; he has every right to live his own life and chose his own path!"

"Tear watch it!" Luke sent his sword through an Oracle Knight who motioned to attack her, pulling the blade from between the soldier's armour and crippling the man. Feeling Luke's back against her own, Tear felt a renewed wave of conviction wash through her.

"I won't let anyone speak less of him," Tear announced. "He may not have been born like the rest of us, but he has the same heart!"

"That's a quite the drastic change in opinion," Legretta commented, ducking behind a boulder to dodge on of Natalia's arrows. She retaliated and grazed the Princess' leg, knocking the young archer over in the process. "You weren't saying such things a few months ago."

"I know there are many wrongs in my past that are related to fomicry," Tear conceded. "And maybe it is true that if the invention of fomicry had never occurred, my family wouldn't have suffered as it has. But I know now that pointless hatred of anything, be it fomicry or the Score or even the Planet's Memory, won't make anyone happy. Think Major, is destroying this planet really what you want? Is this the path you truly believe in?"

"Tear, you of all people should understand why the Commandant acts as he-"

"I didn't ask what my brother believes! I know what he believes, I know how he feels. I asked what you believe Major Legretta!"

"What I believe is irrelevant," Legretta replied. "I once believed many things. I believed that the Commandant was a terrible person; that he was cold and unfeeling and evil. I believed him to be no more than the heartless commander that sent my brother to die in a battle he could never hope to win. Foolish as I was, I swore revenge and I fought to get close to him so that I could do right by my brother's death. But when the opportunity came, I stayed my hand. I had seen how foolish all my so-called "beliefs" had been. I'd seen how he sacrificed for his subordinates, how he suffered for the sake of others who would never understand or even think to thank him. I swore then that his beliefs would be my own, that his goals were mine to fulfill. As long as there is breath in my lungs I will fight for his cause. If he requires my life, I will give it without a second thought. That is what I believe."

Tear's reply was cut short when one of the many Oracle Knights broke past Luke and swung his blade down. She nimbly dodged the blow, spinning around in the same graceful move her staff crashed into the back of his head, sending him stumbling forward where Luke's blade met him. As his body collapsed her eyes met Luke's and they shared a mutual look of determination. They'd
both known it would come to this... that Legretta wouldn't be swayed, but at least they knew that they had tried. Now they could face forward with no reservations.

Tear's melody flew from her lips, blending flawlessly into an arte that ravaged the enemy army. Light crashed to the earth like pillars of lighting, glistening as they vanished in the wake of their destruction. The replica knights fell in masses before her, each blow opening a path to the Major. Legretta scrambled to dodge the attack, but her movements were impaired by her injuries and the unpredictability of the arte left her struggling.

But that same unpredictability was a double-edged blade and Tear knew her control of the hymn was minimal at best. Her allies were as cautious as her enemies. A stray hit ravaged the nearby cliff face, shaking the entire cavern. A boulder dislodged from the ceiling; Tear's eyes flew up at the sudden threat coming down on her.

"You're open!" Legretta shouted sending a flurry of shots at the melodist. Tear cursed in her brief panic. She couldn't block both the gunfire and the assailing rocks with the same barrier!

"Tear!" Luke's voice rang in the cavern. From the corner of her eyes, Tear saw a golden glow and in a burst of light the entire boulder exploded into shimmering lights that flickered and then faded as the fonons dissipated. Luke let out a breath as he composed himself, Tear's barrier expanded covering them both from Legretta's assault.

Tear didn't have the time to spare for thoughts beyond the battle at hand, but she still couldn't shake the speed and precision of the hyperresonance Luke had just put forth. Certainly she knew after all the work with the passage rings he'd developed a mastery of such a forbidden skill, but only now did she realize why his and Asch's existence held such potential for war. Such a destructive power was not to be taken lightly, and she knew it wasn't lightly that Luke had used it in the midst of battle.

As the fight progressed, Tear started noting just how much her former instructor was relying on the forces accompanying her. They continued to fall before her friends' attacks, and it was becoming more and more difficult for her to continue evading. Legretta's counterattacks, once seemingly flawless grew sloppy and laced with openings. Distance was still her greatest asset, and her efforts concentrated on preventing Jade or the twins from casting any artes. Luke and Guy were both preoccupied with the remaining soldiers and Asch's guilt refused to let him stray from the other girls' defence. With Natalia still caring for Anise who had just now succeeded in removing the bullet as well as her own injury, Tear knew if anyone was going to be able to get through to Legretta, she was the one.

"Major, do you really think this path will bring you what you desire?" Tear's knife flew as fast and sharp as her words but missed its mark and found bullets chasing her in reply.

"I've no desires save to see the Commandant succeed. No dreams other than to have his efforts come to fruition. I want nothing but to see him happy!"

"You're wrong, you do have your own dreams, your own desires! You just said so yourself, you want to see my brother happy. You want his approval, his gratitude... you want him to return the feelings you offer to him!"

"That is absurd!"

"You're no different than Major Cantabile, fighting for him because you care about him, because you want to protect him and his dreams, but you don't have to die like she did! There's no reason for you to throw your life away too!"
"If I can't at least show the level of devotion she has, then I could never look the Commandant in the eye. I will never earn his respect in that manner!"

"Major, stop living to please others! Whether you're trying to best Major Cantabile or trying to earn my brother's feelings, you never do anything for yourself. Love isn't like that! Love doesn't mean sacrificing everything you want for him! You shouldn't have to earn his feelings, or prove yourself by sacrificing your life for his cause!"

"Don't speak as if you know anything about me!"

"My brother loved you once," Tear stated. "I truly do believe that, but to love someone doesn't mean dying for them; it's living no matter what the odds are so that you can return to them once everything is over!"

"You're wrong, Mystearica," Legretta shouted through a rain of gunfire. Tear's barrier dropped the bullets from the air, falling to the stone floor like a spring shower.

"No Major, I'm not. I know now that it's wrong to blindly follow someone you care about; if you truly care for them, then you stand up for what you know to be right and help them find the right path. If you loved my brother as you claim to, then you would have tried to stop him when he was sacrificing himself at the passage rings, you would have stopped him from doing things you know to be wrong!"

"Hmph," Legretta scoffed in disappointment. "Of all the people to lose themselves to naivety, you were never one I'd have thought. You were once a realist, logical, able to see the truth clearly."

"Maybe I am naive," Tear conceded. "But this world is one of choices, and that is the choice that I have made for myself. Can I say as much for you?"

Legretta huffed, her chest weighing like lead against her heart as she stared down her student. Each of her soldiers lay lifeless on the floor; her defences gone, the outcome of this battle was obvious but she couldn't retreat. Van wouldn't stand for any more failures. She had to hold her ground here, if he could face all he had and still hold fast, then she had to do at least this much. No matter what it meant.

Time exploded back into motion and the God-General jumped back as two swords came her way. The blond was quick and her retaliating shots hit nothing but air. A second round forced the replica back only to find an arte flying her way from his original. Ducking under the swipe of his sheathe, Legretta landed the hilt of her gun cleanly in the blond's chest. He reeled backwards as the air fled from his lungs. The space surrounding her was completely empty, and the reason for her enemy's sudden retreat hit her a split second too late.

Fonic circles appeared from the earth, rising around her in the moment it took her to draw her breath. Using the momentum she still held from her previous attack, she swung around and flung herself from the center's core just in time to evade the massive flow of lightning that plunged down from the heavens. Mistiming the landing, Legretta tumbled across the ground.

Legretta may have dodged Jade's arte but no one noticed the way she suddenly looked like she'd taken an invisible punch to the stomach. Her legs barely held her weight and to say she was breathing heavily was a massive understatement. Her guns still hung weakly from her hands and she struggled to raise them.

"It seems one of those broken ribs has punctured your lung," Jade surmised. "This battle is over."
"Not yet it isn't... Necromancer," Legretta managed. "You want to get to this Passage Ring, it will be over my corpse."

"Have it your way then," Jade conceded.

Legretta wasn't as quick the second time around and the fire arte caught her leg. Bursting into flames, the God General screamed in agony as she collapsed under her own weight. The fire vanished in an instant, leaving her leg black as charcoal, weeping and raw as its owner fought to contain her screaming before passing out completely. Every fibre in Tear's being made her want to run to her former instructor's side but she stayed where she was. Legretta had made her choice, and Tear had to let her walk the path she'd decided upon. Even knowing that Legretta's injuries were completely beyond her skill to repair, it still hurt to see someone she once looked up to so avidly lie seemingly lifeless on the floor.


"N-Naive," Legretta coughed out. "You once would have followed us... but you were... misled." Legretta barely managed, gaining some small strength through her words. "Once you would have shared our beliefs... but I see now. If it's this replica that's blinding you... then I'll destroy him as well!"

"Luke! No!" Tear screamed.

Legretta's shot grazed Luke's cheek, a stream of blood trickled down from the bullet's trail. Behind him, Asch's hilt connected with the back of Legretta's head, knocking her out cold. With a frustrated sigh Jade stepped forward but Luke moved over to intercept him.

"Luke, enough is enough," Jade stated sternly, his eyes angrily glaring down on the young replica. "Your sentimentality just about got you killed. You should be thankful your brother isn't quite so foolish. Now step aside."

"No," Luke refuted, staring Jade straight in the eye. "She's not a threat anymore. To kill her now would just be murder."

"I know this may be foolish but..." Tear began. She sighed unable to finish, she really didn't want to see Legretta die, but she knew as a soldier that was for the best. Death was the only guarantee she wouldn't be a threat anymore.

"Honestly," Jade sighed in frustration. "If we leave her as she is, she'll die in a matter of hours. It would be kinder to put her out of her misery then to leave her die as she slowly suffocates."

"If she lives or dies now is entirely up to her own will and desire to live," Tear replied. "If possible... I would like to avoid any more meaningless death. I think at the very least we should return her to Daath to be treated, and if she doesn't survive the trip then it would be no different if we were to kill her here."

"Baticul would be closer," Natalia pitched in.

Asch caught his fiancée's glance, surprised by her offer. She instead reiterated, this time her hazel eyes never leaving his, "Tear is right, there should be no more meaningless deaths. No one should have to lose someone close to them if it can be avoided." Asch sighed but smiled.

"They've got a point," Asch said with a shrug. "Besides, all the Seventh Fonists in the world doting
on her won't have her mobile enough to be a threat for a long time."

"You all realize that this is a great deal of effort for naught. Her chances of surviving until she reaches Baticul are next to zero."

"Yes, but as one of her students I feel I owe it to her to at least give her that chance," Tear answered with conviction.


"Well we'd be best to split up then," Natalia said. "Time is of the essence. How to move her though? Nothing we have would be suitable for keeping her motionless."

"Tokunaga would work," Anise offered from her beloved doll's back.

"But what about you?" Tear asked.

"I'm okay to walk as long as I don't have to do any fighting," the young girl replied.

"I'd better come along too then," Tear offered.

"As will I," Natalia stepped in. "If we're going to have Noelle take us to Baticul we'd may as well kill two bird with one stone and get the military organization underway. I presume the rest of you can deal with matters in Grand Chokmah after finishing up here?"

"Leave it to us!" Luke reassured them.

"Yeah, we can handle things here," Guy agreed.

"Actually Guy, I believe it would be best if you would accompany them," Jade stepped in. "There may still be soldiers about and with our Princess more exhausted than she's letting on, they will be in need of the extra fighting strength." Natalia averted her eyes but Guy could see that Jade was right on the money and Natalia was in no way up to any serious battles.

"Alright then, you three be careful," Guy called, his sceptical look landing on the twins.

"We'll be fine," Asch dismissed him casually. "You watch your back; we'll see you in Grand Chokmah."

Turning his back on his friends, Asch followed Luke and Jade as they slowly made their way down into the depths of the Passage Ring. Once he was sure Guy and the girls were out of an earshot, he let out a deep sigh. He wasn't entirely sure what to expect, but seeing as Jade had conveniently gotten the two of them alone for awhile, he would bet the Sword of Lorelei that Jade wanted something from them, or was waiting to give them a good scolding. Or both.

Honestly, Asch couldn't say he was entirely upset with how things had turned out with Legretta. Okay, so maybe he wasn't happy that Luke had turned his back on an enemy that was obviously still conscious, and that Luke had almost gotten a nice bullet through the skull as a result, but he was glad that they hadn't killed her right there and left her to become monster food. He understood Natalia's point perfectly; Legretta was like family to Tear, and Luke was right, she wasn't a threat. Even if she survived, that leg wasn't going to recover, half the muscle had been incinerated; Legretta would be permanently disabled. It was funny how quickly perspectives could shift; suddenly Asch was realizing just how valuable a commodity life really was, now that it was slowly slipping through his fingers.
"Luke," Jade spoke up, breaking the silence, "What did I tell the two of you about using your power?"

"Not to," Luke answered with all the disdain of a child being scolded.

"And how are you feeling now?" He continued.

"Fine, actually."

"Luke, what you do is your own choice, but I will not have you lying to me," Jade replied sternly. "Between your heroics and that Jewel you've been using, you're putting far more strain on your body than you should be. I would not be surprised if you were feeling unusually tired or drawn out."

"I mean it!" Luke insisted with a burst of frustrated energy. "I don't feel anything I haven't felt since the Tower of Rem. All things considered," he continued a bit more calmly, "I actually feel pretty good."

'You still suck at lying,' Asch shot playfully. He didn't get a response. 'Luke...Luke!'

'Huh? What?' Luke sounded startled, like he'd been woken from a daydream.

'How bad is it really?'

'It's really nothing, I'm fine.'

'You don't look fine!' Asch snapped. Asch couldn't believe he'd been so wrapped up in his own little world that he hadn't noticed how pale Luke was compared to usual. Sure they'd just fought a really intense battle, but there was a level to his weariness that was unusual. Then there was the Jewel, another factor the young monarch hadn't even considered. Here he was with the Sword that attracted the fonons, probably protecting him, while Luke fought against the effects of the Jewel every day. 'Luke... you look awful, are you sure you're really okay?'

'It doesn't matter, does it?' Luke replied. 'We still have to shut off the Planet Storm... we don't have a choice.'

'How about I trade you the Sword for the Jewel for awhile?' Asch offered.

'Nah, Jade already told me its effects are minimal unless I'm actually using it. He probably only said that cause he was trying to scold me.'

'Well then why not let me shut off the Radiation Gate? It'll save you the effort at least.'

'No, let me do this. You need to save your strength to free Lorelei. I know I don't have enough left in me to do it myself without disappearing.'

At those words Asch felt his heart seize up. Reality taking a bitter toll on him, but like he'd always seen his little brother do, he swallowed all that pain and instead shot Luke a playful smile.

'What happened to those 20 years of yours?'

Luke chuckled weakly. 'You lie to make me feel better all the time, why can't I every once in awhile?'

'You're an idiot,' Asch scolded but Luke smiled.
"All done now?" Jade asked and Asch scowled. He missed when their connection was a secret, not that it was ever really a secret from Jade. Still, he missed the days where Jade pretended.

"Well regardless of what the two of you settled on for the party line, I would at the very least like to give Luke a good check up once this is over with to ensure he's still holding up alright."

"I'll be fine," Luke uttered quickly. "Really, I'm feeling okay; I don't need a check up. I've got plenty left in me yet."

"You may feel that way, but there's no way of being certain," Jade pointed out.

"If he says he's fine, he's fine," Asch interjected. "Besides, weren't you the one who said you only specialize in autopsies?"

"Precisely."

Luke and Asch simultaneously shuddered.

"Well then," Asch interrupted as they rounded the final corner, entering a room identical to the one they'd seen at the Absorption Gate. "I take it this is it?"


Asch watched solemnly as Luke took his place at the center of the massive glyph. Luke's long red hair flowed around him, pushed by the motion of the fonons as they rose from the core. The air around him seemed to glisten for a moment until the light converged and the Jewel of Lorelei appeared before him. He'd completely mastered Jade's arte of using the contamination effect.

In a burst of light, the Jewel sent a pulse throughout the room, deadening the air as fonons ceased to move. All time around them froze for a moment and then in a burst the entire glyph evaporated sending the masses of fonons scattering about the room.

Asch ran over to Luke just in time to catch his sibling as he collapsed. The Jewel almost rang as it rolled across the floor, halting at Jade's feet. The Necromancer picked up the item and brought it to the twins where Asch accepted it. Luke's face was almost deathly pale, a fact that had certainly not escaped Asch's notice. Still, with more strength than Jade knew Asch would admit it required, he looked up and firmly looked Jade in the eye.

"This is it; now there's no turning back."
Going in Blind

The Albiore's radio crackled, the sound cutting through the otherwise quiet night air. The faint light of the dials provided the sole source of illumination in the airship's cockpit. All of its occupants were elsewhere this night, whether they were back at the palace or halfway across the world in Baticul, Jade was the only person to watch as the lights faded from red to green and the crackle ceased.

"Sorry, Jade," the apology came across the speaker. "Noelle has been doing some upgrades on this end and the radio is a bit jumpy."

"Noelle is upgrading, or you're playing mechanic?" Jade asked tauntingly, perfectly able to imagine Guy's reaction despite the distance between the two. His friends were nothing if not amusingly predictable.

"You say that like I'd have the time to play mechanic, even if she'd let me within a mile of the engine," the blond replied.

"Well seeing as the two of you have been getting along rather well lately, I suppose stranger things have happened."

The Colonel heard a whisper of a curse on the other end. Luke and Tear weren't quite as fun to taunt since they'd made the status of their relationship obvious, and he was quite certain the blond was wishing he wasn't the next most obvious target.

"I missed the last part of what you were saying," Guy spoke up quickly, trying to divert the subject. "It sounded like you've got a plan ironed out for attacking Eldrant."

"Yes," Jade continued, letting the Malkuth noble off the hook. Temporarily. "The countries' respective militaries will draw the island's firepower leaving us an opening to land there and disable the fon machines responsible for the consumption and replication of the land. We'll encounter Dorian General Grants in the process no doubt."

"And Sync too if we're lucky," Guy added sarcastically.

"On that subject, how did our latest opponent make out?"

"Legretta's still breathing, but the doctors don't have much hope for her. Then again, she's made it a week when they didn't give her 24 hours so I guess we'll see. There's not much more they can do for her."

"That might be for the best, we've enough concerns without her wreaking havoc. She may not be a physical threat, but it wouldn't take much to rouse the citizens. They are far too unstable at the moment."

"Yeah," Guy agreed. "Things are bad, but not nearly as bad as they could have been. We can thank Asch for circumventing that one. Proclaiming that the Planet Storm was the cause of the miasma and that it had to be shut down to prevent the miasma from escaping the core again... and to think it wasn't entirely a lie."

"Some quick thinking on his part," Jade concurred. "But there was still a good deal of restlessness on the subject; people are still uneasy following the disaster with the miasma. It will take quite some time for them to settle completely."
"Not much more we can do on that front though. Except see this through to the end, once and for all."

"You sound uncertain on the matter," Jade commented.

"It's not that I'm uncertain... it's more that I can't believe we've actually reached this point."

"Given the course of events, I think this outcome was rather inevitable."

"I know that, I just can't believe it's finally here. I mean, this is it. We've actually made it here. Who'd have thought?"

"Indeed. Don't forget, we'll meet up in Chesedonia in a week's time. Most of the forces have already been repositioned but it will still take a bit of time to get the last units organized."

"The perfect neutral ground, huh?" Guy commented. "Well if the girls don't insist on catching up with you sooner, we'll see you then."

"Restless?"

"More than a little. Anise has made a full recovery which has only made things worse."

"We'll be seeing you then."

"Yeah," Guy chuckled. "Sooner rather than later if this keeps up."

The voice cut out and the sound of static flooded the silent cockpit. Jade flicked a switch and the lights on the dashboard went dark. He remained in the darkness a moment longer and allowed his thoughts to stew. There was much to think about before their journey to Eldrant, many factors to consider, outcomes to be avoided where possible. The fate of the twins weighed especially heavy on his mind. He expected, as he knew they did, that this would be their final journey.

Luke's weakness after their last venture made that fact painfully obvious to all who were privy to the right information. The use of the Jewel to shut down the Planet Storm was nothing compared to what would be required of them to free Lorelei. Even accounting for the power Luke used in his little display of heroics, there was little doubt in Jade's mind they'd return from Eldrant a couple people shy.

The cool evening air did little to sort his thoughts and he continued to mull over the boys' fate. He didn't particularly care for the way the twins' journey was to conclude. After all, for all he'd never really admit it, he'd grown rather fond of the pair. They were so entertaining and never ceased to find new ways to torture themselves. Really, they were a fascinating study.

His mind continued to turn but still it refused to tell him anything he didn't know, or provide him with any idea he hadn't previously considered. For a subject he'd thought on for such an extent, he'd frustratingly little to show for it. There was no problem without solution, no puzzle that could not be completed with the right resources and the proper angle. Jade was determined to find a way around the inevitability that hung before them, and for the first time in a very long time, Jade began to regret giving up his study of fomicry.

"No way, Asch!" Luke's voice flowed into the hallway from behind a crack where his door wasn't quite closed. "I don't care what you say, it's not happening. I can't."

What was this? Jade stopped a few steps shy of the door. The dim illumination provided by the light that spilled from the twins' room did little to alert them to his presence. A faint grin came
across Jade's face. What could they possibly be arguing about at this hour?

"Luke, you know you have to do this," Asch retorted.

"We don't have enough time!"

"Now you're just making excuses," Asch stated. "We've got at least a week before the forces move to Chesedonia. There is more than enough time."

Jade's grin widened as he quickly ascertained the topic of their discussion.


"Oh come on." Jade could practically see Asch rolling his eyes. "You don't think Jade would actually hurt you, do you?"

"Think long and hard about that one, Asch." Luke stated sarcastically.

"It won't be that bad!"

"Hey, you may be willing to stick your neck out and risk it, but I'm not! And I'm the one that has to do it!"

"You heard what Jade said at the Radiation Gate-"

"I know!" Luke cut his brother off. "But that doesn't make me any more inclined to do it."

"You know you're not going to have a choice..."


Jade chuckled to himself, continuing on when the boys' conversation returned to less interesting topics. Those two... always planning something or another. Something didn't quite sit right, however; it was far too simple to have them play right into his hands like that, especially given that Asch was involved.

That was fine by him. He had nothing else on his schedule for the following day. This warranted a bit more investigation...

Anise stretched her arms as she disembarked the Albiore right onto Grand Chokmah's pier. She remembered the days when they had to park an hour's walk from the city to keep themselves from being shot down, and she was more than happy to say those days were officially behind them. Okay, so maybe she wasn't so naive as to believe that the peace between countries would last forever, but it would last for as long as she had some kind of say in the matter.

Well... maybe not. As much as she'd like to believe her incredible charm could have any king eating out of her hands, she'd watched the political games that had gone on even just over the past couple weeks in Baticul and it was enough to make her head spin. She definitely had a long way to go when it came to understanding the intricacies of inter and intra-palace politics. She'd give Asch and Natalia credit for that one, it wasn't easy.

In spite of her best attempts to pay attention and learn things from the work they'd been doing in Baticul, Anise was bored out of her mind. Things were so organized and well planned out that they'd nothing to do. It wasn't like the military was out of practice given they'd been at war less than half a year ago, everyone knew what needed to be done and how to go about doing it.
So she had decided to make it her mission to convince everyone to come to Grand Chokmah. She missed Asch, Luke and Jade that were in Malkuth's capital getting that side of things straightened out, and even if their help wasn't needed, at least with Luke and Asch around things never got boring. They always had something or another up their sleeve. For some reason though, no one thought it was worth the trip! Oh well, she always had more persistence than they did anyway. Guy, Tear, Natalia and Noelle had no choice but to follow her lead.

"I suppose we ought to go greet Peony," Natalia mulled. Anise grinned; she pretended to be all displeased but she was secretly glad for the chance to see Asch again.

"Yes," Tear agreed. "And leave a message for the others that we've come to meet them rather than wait to meet up in Chesedonia." Anise chuckled; lovebird number two was just as eager to see Luke. At least she didn't pretend to be as disgruntled as Natalia was. Besides, getting her away from Legretta would do her some good. She'd been in to see her former instructor every day, not that she knew Anise had been spying on her, of course.

Anise couldn't say she blamed the melodist though. She could appreciate that Tear still respected her former instructor, even though Legretta had made some bad choices it wasn't like she was a bad person. None of them were, Anise could see that now. The Commandant, the God-Generals, they were just fighting for what they believed to be right. They were no different than her or any of her friends. Not everyone thought that the course of action she'd taken was right, so she could appreciate that their decisions didn't automatically make them bad people. They were just desperate, each with their own reason; trying to reclaim something they'd lost. If she could have Ion back... really have him back... she couldn't honestly say she'd be any different.

"Well what do you know?" Guy's voice drew Anise from her train of thought. "Look who we have here." The blond noble waved his hand eagerly, flagging down the two redheads across the street.

"Hi there guys," Asch greeted them. "What are you doing here? I thought we were going to meet up in Chesedonia."

"Yeah well Anise over here had other plans," Guy stated with mock annoyance. "There really wasn't anything left for us to accomplish in Baticul so we decided it wouldn't hurt to meet up. I'll hand it to you guys; the castle is pretty organized when it comes to this stuff."

"Yes, they've done very well given the unprecedented cooperation and coordination of their militaries. Nothing of this nature has ever been done before," Natalia pointed out. "It is quite the feat."

"And one to be proud of," Tear added.

"Indeed," Natalia agreed.

"So what are the two of you up to?" Guy asked.

"Nothing," Luke muttered. The younger sibling seemed disgruntled about something, and if he could manage a more sour look on his face, Guy would be surprised.

"What's up with you, Luke?"

"Don't ask."

Asch laughed and rolled his eyes. "He wasn't feeling very good after stopping the Planet Storm so Jade's going to give him a quick check up."
"Really?" Tear asked worriedly. "How are you feeling now? Have you been sick at all?"

"I'm fine," Luke insisted. "Asch just won't believe me."

"With your track record, who can blame me?"

'I hate you so much.' Luke shot.

"It probably is nothing," Asch admitted with a shrug. "But with all the action we're about to be seeing I thought it would be a good idea, just in case."

"Asch is right," Tear agreed. "Even if it's precautionary, it'll put us all at ease to know you're at your best."

Luke muttered something inaudible but he obviously couldn't bring himself to argue with Tear.

"This seems off," Guy stated plainly, raising an eyebrow suspiciously. "You two are planning something, aren't you?"

"Maybe," Asch shrugged, but the blond didn't miss the grin that tugged at his lips. All he could do was shake his head. What were they planning this time?

Well whatever it was, it probably involved Jade and he wanted no part in it.

After supper, Luke found him alone in the palace's medical wing. It was curiously similar to the one in Baticul's castle, with many of the same supplies peaking through each of the empty examining rooms. He couldn't believe he was actually doing this. Damn Asch, Luke had already agreed to the check-up, why did he have to drag Tear into it too? Asch knew damn well there was no way he could back out with her watching him all day. This was the last bloody time he was ever going to play Asch's scapegoat!

Luke's destination was clearly marked; it was the only room in the entire wing with the lights still on. Come to think of it, why wasn't there anyone else around? The entire corridor was deserted. Even if it was getting dark, there should at least be someone around... right? Luke shook his head; he was being stupid and letting his nerves get the better of him. Things probably worked different than in Baticul, and maybe the doctor on duty had gone for supper. No one being around was a good thing. Less people around, the fewer people might accidentally overhear anything about his secret. Not that he really cared whether or not people found he was a replica... at least he didn't care nearly as much as he used to. All the important people knew, and accepted him for who he was; in light of that, everyone else's opinion didn't really seem to matter.

Luke sat down on a chair in the examining room and waited. It didn't look like Jade had been here yet, and Luke secretly hoped it would stay that way all night. He knew better than to think Jade of all people would even be late, much less forget about an appointment, but he could still hope. Luke felt his nerves getting the better of him again. Why was he doing this? Okay, so he knew why but why did it have to be him? Next time Asch was switching places with him. He didn't care if Jade could tell!

No sooner had the thought crossed Luke's mind, Jade walked in with a silver platter full of strange, and very painful looking equipment that Luke had never seen before. The door closed behind him and locked with a definitive click.

"H-Hi Jade," Luke managed. The colonel remained with his back turned, carefully adorning a pair of plastic gloves. He snapped the elastic bands as he put them on, sending chills running down

"Well then Luke," Jade began, turning around with a particularly uncomfortable looking instrument in hand. The glare hid his eyes behind his glasses and Luke bolted from his chair until he found himself trapped in a corner of the room.

"I-I t-thought you said it would be quick and easy," Luke managed to spit out. "N-nothing to worry about."

"Yes well, since your brother has so graciously provided you as a guinea pig to distract me from his activities tonight, I intend to take full advantage of the opportunity."

*Oh dear sweet Lorelei he knows.* Luke cowered in his corner.

"Oh and don't worry about your sibling," Jade offered. "I've already made all the necessary arrangements to deal with him."

Luke gulped what he feared would be his last breath of air.

"Now," Jade said with a sinister grin. "Shall we begin?"

Asch threw his jacket over his shoulders and took a quick glance at the time. Perfect. Jade should be busy dealing with Luke by now so the road was clear. He wouldn't be busy long, but all Asch needed was a head start. After well over a week's worth of effort, Asch was finally ready to set his plan into motion. Admittedly Asch wasn't sure why he'd put so much effort into arranging tonight, it was part distraction from what was waiting on Eldrant, part getting back at Jade and part boredom. Regardless of why it had come to be, Asch was looking forward to watching it play out.

Just as the young monarch was about to step through the front gate, the two soldiers on duty extended their spears and blocked his path.

"Apologies, sir," The first guard spoke up. "But you cannot pass."

"I'm just heading out to get some food," Asch lied.

"If you're hungry, the kitchens will gladly prepare anything you may wish to eat," the second guard provided. Both moved forward and pushed Asch back into the entryway.

"That's kind of you," Asch replied hesitantly. "But I want to go out; the fresh air will do me some good."

"I apologize, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to remain in the palace tonight."

"Why?" Asch demanded.

"Orders are that you are forbidden from leaving the palace tonight," the guard replied simply.

"Whose orders?"

"That is not your concern."

"It was Jade, wasn't it?"

"I'm under no obligation to provide you with that information."
Damn it! He should have known the old man would be onto him! Well if Jade knew him well enough to have anticipated this, than he should know better than to think that a couple of measly guards were enough to stop him!

Asch fainted to the left and made dash for the door but the guard had surprisingly quick reflexes and snatched the redhead by the arm. Damn it all, these were not the usual guard. Asch cursed his inability to draw his sword on the palace guard for fear of sparking much bigger issues.

"If you will not stay here of your own volition then-

"Ha!" The sound of crunching armour echoed in the entryway and a massive yellow arm broke the hold the soldier had on Asch. Tokunaga swung around and caught the second guard in the stomach.

"Anise!" Asch shouted in surprise.

"I don't know what you're up to, but it involves getting at the Colonel right?" Anise asked mischievously. "I want in!"

A huge grin spread across Asch's face and the unlikely duo took off into Grand Chokmah's night.

"Closed?" Anise shrieked in disappointment. "Why, in all of Yulia's creation, would a restaurant be closed on a Remday night?"

There was no doubt of the fact that the establishment was shut down. If the lack of light and activity in the high-class building wasn't enough of a hint, then the several large red signs and rope that cordoned off the area made it painfully obvious. On any other night, the air would be filled with the scents of exotic delicacies, glasses overflowing with mirth and wine as nobility frolicked about. Tonight, however, the entire place seemed dead, though the faint scent of food still hung in the air, it was cold and stale. Several of the restaurant's waiters stood helplessly outside the building, unsure exactly what to make of the situation.

"Damn it all," Asch cursed. "Of all nights, why tonight?"

"Hey!" Anise chased down the head waiter. "What happened here?"

"Nothing, miss. We are unfortunately unable to serve you tonight, but I hope you'll return in the future."

"Oh come on," Anise insisted angrily. "You can still smell the food; you obviously haven't been closed long, what happened here? I want to know why you're closed on the busiest night of the week!"

"It was the military," a younger waiter piped up. "They detained our chefs for questioning."

"Why? What did they do?"

"Nothing!" The head waiter cut the boy off with a stern glare. "Even the soldiers said they were unsure of the reason for detaining all of them, but until the matter could be properly cleared up, they have to remain at the military headquarters."

"He's onto us," Asch concluded.

"Wow, what were you doing that has the Colonel this fired up?" Anise asked.

"Hey, you," Asch flagged down the young waiter that had helped them before. "There would have
been a couple here not long ago. They'd probably just arrived when the restaurant was shut down; I need to know where they went."

"I apologize sir, but there was no such couple here," the head waiter stepped in again.

"We were guests of that couple, and we just need to meet up with them," Asch stated, his displeasure obvious in his voice.

"They were not expecting any guests."

"So there was a couple!" Anise jumped on the man's slip up.

"N-No there was not!"

"Look," Anise shook her head. "I don't know who said what to you to make you hate us and give us all this hassle, but whatever it was, I can guarantee it isn't half the trash you're going to have to deal with if you don't start helping us. See my friend here," Anise leaned up and whispered into the man's ear, nodding her head towards Asch. "He's got connections, lots of 'em, and he's got a nasty temper." Asch made a show of fidgeting, tapping his fingers impatiently. "He's pretty quiet now, but keep this up and you'll be so screwed over, you'll be eating off the streets for the next 10 years."

"N-nonsense," the head waiter replied.

"Hey I know them!" One of the waiters whispered eagerly to a co-worker behind his boss' back. "Aren't they the ones staying at the palace? I saw them when I was up there serving the other night."

"Really?"

"Yeah, my sister works in the kitchens so I help out there every now and then. They're special guests to the emperor himself."

Impossible, the head waiter looked down at the girl standing before him, then to her irritated companion. These kids? Guests to Emperor Peony? The girl's grin widened maliciously; she could see the connection he had made.

"Alright then," Anise shrugged. "But don't say I didn't warn you. I hope it was worth it just to keep us from meeting up with our friends."

"Come on!" Asch growled, emitting a dangerous air. "What's the hold up over there? Are you going to tell us where they went or not?"

Anise almost danced as she jogged innocently back to Asch, her voice a sweet singsong as it escaped her lips. "I don't think he's going to tell us-"

"They left heading west!" The waiter sputtered. "T-They said they were going to head to the park instead."

"Thank you so much!" Anise smiled with enough false sweetness to rot the man's teeth. The waiter waved hesitantly, glad simply to have the odd pair out of his hair, and if he was lucky, out of his life for good.

"That was some pretty good acting back there," Asch commented once they were out of an earshot.
"Of course," Anise flipped one of her pigtails. "I'm a professional. Not bad on your part either, you had him scared out of his wits."

"You say that like I was acting."

"Of course you were," Anise answered without missing a beat. "You may be a jerk from time to time but you're not mean-spirited like that. Now why don't you tell me what exactly we're doing? Who's this couple we're trying to catch up with?"

"What the-" Asch stopped in his tracks.

"Hey, Guy! Natalia!" Anise called waving her hand in the air. The blond couple looked surprised, startled from whatever conversation they'd been having before fidgeting guiltily as if they'd been caught doing something they shouldn't have been. Both worriedly eyed the other but when Anise didn't show any sign of backing down, they reluctantly joined her. "What has the two of you out and about? Or better yet, how'd you two break out of the palace?"

"Break out?" Natalia asked. "We walked out the front door. Is there any reason we shouldn't have?"

"What?" Anise whined. "Why were we the only two under house arrest?"

"This doesn't have anything to do with Luke's appointment with Jade, does it?" Guy asked.

"How about first you tell me what you and Natalia are doing out all by yourselves?" Asch shot back.

"What?" Guy seemed startled before getting flustered, neither state helping his sudden lack of vocabulary. "Well we- I mean, Natalia and I were just going to, that is-"

"We were going to the restaurant up ahead for a bite to eat but found out it had been closed for the evening," Natalia cut in. "We were in the process of finding another place to eat when you spotted us."

"Oooo," Anise cooed. "Romantic dinner for two? I know affairs are the hot new thing and all, but you really shouldn't be talking about it in front of your fiancé; they aren't switched you know."

"What? Why I never- Asch knows I would do no such thing!"

"Well then what were you doing?" Asch asked. "If you're not on a date, then you can tell me what you're up to."

"There is no reason I have to report my every move to you," Natalia protested.

"Why can't you tell me?" Asch prodded, more playfully than anything.

"It's none of your concern what I chose to do with Guy!"

"If you're going on dates with him, then yes it is my concern," Asch pointed out.

"Okay, enough you two," Guy cut in. "Why don't you tell us what you and Anise are up to, since you're so intent on demanding answers?" Though their debate had all the makings of an argument, it was clear that both sides were simply clashing their wills. Neither distrusted the other, rather they trusted each other beyond a shadow of a doubt; it was a game: who would cave first? Who would win the information they sought?
"I don't have to answer you," Asch answered simply, wandering off.

"I don't know for sure either," Anise admitted. "But whatever it is, it has the Colonel written all over it. We were just at that restaurant looking for a couple, but the military had shut it down for no apparent reason. The staff was being all hush-hush about the couple too, like someone had threatened them."

"You don't suppose Jade is out on a date, do you?" Natalia asked.

"I don't..." Guy began but trailed off when he saw the glimmer in Anise's eyes. He didn't like that look she had... trouble always followed that kind of mischievous excitement.

"Of course!" Anise squealed in delight. "This is the Colonel's home town! Someone like him must have a sweetheart or two on the side! After being dragged away from her arms for so long he just has to steal a moment away with her, no matter how fleeting!"

"Anise, I don't think..." Guy began.

"I certainly wouldn't put it past Asch to try and uncover the identity of this companion of his," Natalia agreed.

"The blackmail would be useful," Anise agreed. "Then again he might be taking the direct approach and just crash the date here and now. Of course he might..." The dark-haired girl continued to ramble as she skipped off after the redhead.

"Those two..." Guy sighed. "Seriously, you'd think they'd grow up a little."

"I think we should follow them," Natalia declared.

"What?"

"I-I mean there's no saying what kind of trouble they might get themselves into and as their friends it is our duty to watch out for them."

"But what about our-"

"Asch has already caught us once," Natalia pointed out. "It would be best to save it for another time."

"You just want to spy along with them, don't you?" Guy asked sceptically.

"Of course not! I'm genuinely concerned for their wellbeing."

"You heard them right? Jade locked them in the palace, and shut down an entire high class restaurant just to stop them."

"All the more reason to be concerned! Come Guy, if we don't catch up, we'll lose them."

"Wait, when did I get involved in this?" The blond protested.

"Hurry up!"

Guy sighed in defeat. "Coming..."

"Remind me what you're doing here again?" Asch asked Guy tauntingly. The streets between the
restaurant and the park were well lit and well travelled by the citizens this time of night, allowing the four friends to easily blend into the crowd. "I thought you said something about us needing to grow up."

"You heard that, huh?" Guy noted, keeping stride beside the redhead.

"Among other things," Asch replied with a shrug as he continued to walk down the sidewalk. The park was only a few blocks away. "Sorry to catch you and interrupt your date, better luck next time."

"Oh for the last time, it was not a date!"

"Sure. Didn't sound like one to me either," Asch shot back.

"Asch, when are you going to drop it?" Guy asked.

"When rappigs fly."

"That can be arranged," the blond muttered. They'd fly right into Asch's face if he had any say in the matter.

"They seem to be having fun," Natalia commented to Anise while watching the guys bicker from a few feet back.

"If you call that fun," Anise remarked. "I think it's too one-sided. Asch is clearly winning."

"I think Guy is doing a very good job of holding his own," Natalia argued.

"Defending your new boyfriend, huh? I guess he does need it more."

"Anise!" Natalia protested and the young girl began laughing.

"Too bad Tear wasn't here, she could settle the score. You know... come to think of it, I haven't seen Tear all night."

"Neither have I," Guy agreed. "She disappeared just after supper."

Anise cackled. "Maybe you two aren't the only ones with a secret affair."

"Would you both stop that!" Natalia shouted louder than she intended.

"I'm just saying," Anise insisted. "Maybe Jade is meeting Tear on the sly. I mean they're both soldiers and all, I bet they have tons they can bond over!"

"Impossible," the princess argued. "Tear would never do such a thing, she loves Luke! Besides, Jade is almost twice her age!"

"So?" Anise queried. "Tear is twice Luke's age."

"That..."

"She does have a point," Guy conceded.

"It is so possible!" Anise continued with that same spark in her eye. Nothing quite got the former Fon Master guardian excited like a scandal. "Nothing against Luke or anything, but younger men are so hard to handle. Their immaturity is a lot to deal with. Now and then a woman needs an older
man, someone reliable, who knows how to satisfy her needs."

"Okay, now you're weirding *me* out," Asch spoke up. "I don't even want to think about the implications of what you just said."

"You wouldn't know; you're the younger one. I mean, why do you think Natalia is dating Guy?"

"Oh for the love of Lorelei!" Guy snapped.

"You can't deny it," Anise almost sang. "Tear could totally be dating Jade! I'm going to beat you all to the park and prove it! I'm going to blow this scandal wide open!"

"You've created a monster," Guy managed, watching Anise bolt down the street towards the park.

"I didn't create anything," Asch shrugged. "If anyone spurred this on it was you and Natalia with your-"

"Finish that sentence and I swear I will knock you onto Eldrant from here."

"I would love to see you try," the redhead retorted.

"Asch, do tell; we're not really searching for Jade and Tear, are we?" Natalia asked.

"Who knows," Asch replied slyly, his grin revealing that he did, in fact, know exactly who they were following. He would sooner admit defeat to the Colonel than divulge anything though, so they followed Anise to the park and Guy prayed only that he would escape tonight with his sanity and his limbs all in one piece.

"Peony and Nephry?" Anise almost spat, her voice drowning in disappointment. "That's it? Peony and Nephry is who we've been chasing this whole time? No secret affairs, no shocking romantic twists? Everyone knows they're practically a couple; that's no fun at all!"

"Anise, pipe down or they're going to hear us," Guy commented, hauling the dark-haired girl back into the bush they'd been hiding in. The park was completely deserted, probably due the fact that the entrances had all been sealed off. They had managed to sneak around the guard and get in through a hole in the gates, but it was obvious that no one was supposed to be here. The real question was whose doing was it? Jade or Peony's?

"Definitely Peony's" Asch said aloud, answering for himself the same question that had gone through Guy's mind. His eyes followed the couple as they walked casually about, too far away for their conversation to be overheard; Peony cracked a goofy grin and Nephry laughed, easing Asch's worries. So far, so good. The restaurant didn't seem to have messed things up so far.

"Asch, I think an explanation would be in order at this point," Natalia pointed out. "Why are you so intent on following Peony around? I can understand the fun in spying, but it is not our business; these are Peony's personal affairs."

"Not a chance. Jade's already gone to huge lengths to try and stop this date from happening and I'll be damned if I lose to the old man now. I spent way to long between getting Nephry to agree to come here and convincing Peony to go out on a blind date. I am *not* letting him ruin it now."

"That would explain why he shut down the restaurant," Natalia stated.

"Is that where they were supposed to go?" Anise asked.
"Yeah," Asch confirmed. "He must have found out and got there first. That's why I'm going to make sure he doesn't interfere any further, even if I have to follow them all night."

"Alright!" Anise said, her voice full of determination. Her eyes were fired up. "We're going to show the Colonel what we're made of. This is going to be the greatest date ever!"

"Sorry to be the rain on your parade, but why would Jade be trying to interfere?" Guy asked. "It seems to me he's got better things to do with his time."

"He's Nephry's older brother," Asch stated like it was all the reason anyone would need.

"So?" Guy argued. "You haven't sabotaged Luke and Tear."

"Have they gone on a date yet?" Asch's head spun around, his piercing glare almost knocking Guy over.

"Uh... no."

"Not officially," Anise stipulated, deciding not to point out all the alone time they'd obviously had since they'd gone official and such.

"Exactly," Asch replied simply. "Of course if Jade needs something better to do, he can always sabotage Natalia and Guy's dates."

"Alright, enough is enough," Natalia snapped. "You want to know what we were doing? I asked for Guy's assistance in finding a small gift for you as a thank you for everything you've done for me lately."

"Natalia..." Guy began.

"No it's alright Guy," Natalia interrupted. "I was the one who asked you to accompany me this evening and you've swallowed more than enough on my account."

"I'm sorry," Asch said genuinely.

"It's alright," Guy answered with a smirk. "I'd be worried if you didn't give us a hard time."

"Still-"

"Let's just leave it at that," Natalia stood in. "It was all in good fun, there is no need for any hard feelings, understood?"

"Understood," Asch replied with a chuckle.

Natalia smiled, trying to bury her own feelings of guilt. She didn't want Asch feeling bad; she felt bad enough having lied to his face as she just had. She simply couldn't tell him the truth though; she couldn't tell him that she had asked Guy out so they could talk about Luke and Asch's strange behaviour lately... so they could talk about the fears of what it might mean, about the whispers that haunted her thoughts late at night. She couldn't say that to his face, but lying to it was almost as difficult.

She caught Guy's eyes and he flashed an apologetic look, thanking her for taking the hit. What she'd said hadn't been a complete lie. It had been her that asked him to discuss the matter, and he had taken more than his share of Asch's verbal assault. They would just have to save the conversation for another time. It wasn't an issue she could afford to drop all together, and she knew
if anyone suspected, much less had figured something out about their overly stubborn companions, it would be Guy.

"As much as I hate to break this up and all," Anise interrupted. "But your happy couple is gone."

"Damn it!" Asch jumped up from their cover, and sure enough, the park was completely deserted. "Which way did they go?"

"We'd have seen them if they came towards the west exit," Anise deduced. "They must have gone towards the eastern one!"

"Do we really need to keep following them?" Guy asked reluctantly. "I mean Jade couldn't have known what they planned to do when the restaurant was closed; they should be fine for the rest of the night."

Asch turned and looked at Guy as if he were the stupidest person in the city. "This is Jade we're talking about. Now come on before we lose them!"

"He does raise a valid point," Natalia insisted.

"Look, I really don't think-"

"Move it!" Asch barked; he and Anise were already halfway across the clearing.

Guy sighed in defeat; he may have left the service of the Fabre house, but it seemed that he would be taking orders from Asch for the rest of his life.

The first few streets beyond the park were deserted; citizens had seen the park was closed and gone to do other things, but as Asch and his friends got further back into the city, the crowds began to return. If he didn't spot the couple before they got to the entertainment district, there wasn't much chance they would be finding them again. His eyes darted from side to side as he ran, looking for any flash of blonde hair, the deep blue of the cloaks the two had been wearing, anything. The number of people on the streets was slowly increasing; he was running out of time. He had to make sure everything went well; he wasn't losing to Jade.

"Over there!" Anise tugged at Asch's sleeve. Sure enough, two hooded figures were walking up the opposite side of the road. It had worked out well that it was winter and the cloaks didn't seem at all out of place; it wasn't as if Peony could openly walk down the streets of his capital without drawing at least some attention.

"Okay," Asch locked onto his target that had just turned north up a main street. "Which way are they heading?"

"If my memory serves me correctly, the entertainment district is south of here," Natalia stated.

"The theatre is north though," Guy pointed out before silently berating himself for encouraging this kind of behaviour.

"A play!" Anise chirped. "Perfect! The lights go down low; it's the perfect opportunity for some romance!"

"Anise!" Natalia protested.

"What can we do to improve the mood? No date is complete without a romantic kiss!"
"Don't bother," Guy said to Natalia, shaking his head. "We lost her at the park."

"Wait!" Asch stuck his arm out, halting his companions. The pair ahead of them had stopped, and the four stalkers ducked behind a nearby stall in case they decided to turn around. "Why did they stop?"

"Maybe this is where they first met! Maybe he's gonna propose!" Anise squealed as loud as she dared.

"No, something's wrong," Asch insisted. Besides, Peony and Nephry had met in Keterburg.

In a sudden burst of movement, the figure on the left, who must have been Nephry, was hauled forcefully into the alley. Outraged, the second figure gave chase, bolting after her in a flurry of blue cloak.

"Damn it!" Asch shouted, taking off from his hiding spot. "Hurry up; we've got to help them!"

Guy was the first one after Asch; this was bad. The secret date was all in good fun, but if something happened to Peony then everything they were working towards would go down the drain. They couldn't let some thief or scumbag ruin all that for a couple purses full of gald!

Hearing his friends behind him, Asch ducked into the alley, stopping dead in his tracks, the other three nearly colliding into his sudden gesture. It was completely empty. "Damn! They couldn't have gotten far!" Asch cursed out loud. But which way?

Suddenly, a shadow obscured the light from the street. Three armed men blocked their exit from the narrow alleyway. In front of them another two emerged, along with the pair in blue cloaks: a man and woman Asch had never seen before.

Shit, he'd walked right into it.

"Hey!" Guy called out to the couple. "I know you! You're from Jade's-"

"I believe you were informed that you were not to leave the palace grounds this evening," the woman cut him off sternly, drawing her spear; the men surrounding her followed suit with their own weapons.

Asch quickly tried to assess his opponents and cursed. He could see the outlines of the additional men hiding just outside the alleyway should they try to resist. It was too narrow; they were never going to win. He'd be damned if he let that stop him though.

Asch drew his sword, shifted his weight but before he'd taken the first step he was knocked back. The arte wasn't powerful, but its precision hit Asch directly on the hand; sending the Key of Lorelei skittering to the ground. In the duration of a heart beat three of the soldiers had him pinned, restraining his arms as he flailed against their strength.

Natalia picked up the Key of Lorelei, but gestured to the soldiers that she had no intention of resisting, nor did Anise or Guy and they quietly accepted their escort back to the palace. Asch had other ideas, but the soldiers had him and he wasn't getting far.

"Damn it!" Asch screamed into the night. "Why does Jade always win?"

Across Grand Chokmah, a quaint little restaurant serenaded its only two patrons with a melody on the harp. The music shifted through the air, dancing on the candlelight that served as the only
The pursuit "The pursuants have been seized," a soldier reported, quietly interrupting the guard already in place. "Your orders, Captain? Shall we escort the remaining two here as well?"

The captain shook his head. "No, you heard Colonel Curtiss' orders. As long as no one is in pursuit or bothering them, we are to leave them alone." "Understood."

Nephry set her fork down on the empty plate before her, the candle light dancing along the china's rims. The scent of fresh flowers wafted through the air as the food sat pleasantly in her stomach. The cuisine was exquisite, fulfilling, but not so heavy it made one regret their indulgence. Across from her sat her escort for the evening, carefully wiping his mouth with a white napkin. He shot her one of his goofy grins and she felt the same inevitable smile tug at her lips.

"What did you think?" Peony asked.

"I think the food was wonderful. My compliments to the chef."

"I thought you might like it. You never cared for the fancy stuff anyway."

"You still remember that," Nephry commented.

"Thought I'd forgotten the details, didn't you?" Peony retorted. "I haven't forgotten anything... those Keterburg years were the best of my life. How could they not be, having spent them with you?"

"You're still the smooth talker, I see," Nephry commented adjusting her glasses.

"You've changed though. Two years ago you'd never have come with me tonight."

"Admittedly, I was quite surprised to receive Asch's invitation. It was rather sudden; it left me uncertain as to how I should react. I was certain you had a hand in the matter."

"I'm glad you decided to accept," Peony added. "I was pretty surprised when the kid told me he'd set me up on a blind date."

"A blind date?"

"Yes?" Peony replied with a bit of hesitation.

"So you would have gone on a date with another woman?" Nephry prodded, an eyebrow raised.

"Of course not! I-I totally knew it was you! I mean who else would he invite?"

Nephry gave the ruler a sceptical look but a grin spread across her face. "Maybe I should have refused."

"Why didn't you?" Peony asked more seriously. "I've lost count of the times I've asked you to come visit, what made you say yes this time?"

"I didn't intend to," Nephry admitted. "But Asch proved rather persuasive; I didn't quite have it in me to turn him down."
Peony burst out laughing, the hearty sound filling the small restaurant. "I think that brother of yours is rubbing off on him. Then again, I suppose he could have worse influences in his life. Jade's come out of it quite the softie."

"Is that so?" Nephry inquired. She hadn't seen her brother since his previous visit to Keterburg what seemed like ages ago, and yet she knew the truth in Peony's words. She'd received a letter from her sibling, the first he'd ever sent her, only a few short months ago.

"Yeah, you should see the way he dotes on those friends of his. It's enough to make some of us a little jealous," Peony said with a wink.

"I'm glad he's been able to find people like that. Everyone should have someone they care for in their lives... especially my brother."

"Well for better or worse, he's got their backs in no matter what crazy adventure they embark upon."

"They've accomplished a great deal, haven't they?" Nephry commented.

"And I suspect we don't even know the half of it," Peony agreed. "You know, sometimes I wonder how things would have turned out had it been us in their place."

"An interesting question; at the very least, we know how it would have ended."

Peony chucked sadly. "Yeah, as much as I hate to admit it, we had our battle and we gave up on it. We let the Score win."

"There was no other choice."

"No," Peony argued. "There was, I was just too weak to take it. Asch and the rest of them, they weren't. They didn't just chalk their misfortune up to fate, to the Score... they made a stand and they fought tooth and nail for what they wanted. I admire them for that. It's that kind of mindset that will make Asch a great king. Of course, I do envy him for one other thing..."

"And what might that be?" Nephry asked.

"He has a strong queen at his side."

"Peony..."

"I know I've asked you this before... and I mean it as much as the first time I asked. Please consider joining me here in Grand Chokmah. I know what it means for you, and I won't make light of the sacrifices it would take on your part... but I do promise I will work every day to make sure you never regret it. You told me once that we couldn't be together, because I couldn't choose you over my country, and you were right. So here I am, selfishly asking if I can have both."

"I don't know if I can..." Nephry looked away; Peony's sincere gaze seemed to look right into her heart.

"You and I both know that you're the best governor Keterburg's ever seen. I know you would be a wonderful Empress for Malkuth."

"I just... I don't think I'm ready for that yet."

"That's okay," Peony replied gently, placing his hand over hers and stealing her hazel gaze. "Think
on it as long as you have to. Even if you take five, ten, fifty years... I'll be waiting."

Now... and forever.
On the Eve of Destiny

It had been so long since he'd visited Chesedonia, Luke had almost forgotten just how hot the trading center could be. Between the sweltering sun and the thick crowds lining the streets, Luke was more than happy when he realized the mid-day sun was behind him. There was a lot more work involved in preparing for their assault on Eldrant than he thought there would be and it seemed like forever since he'd been so involved in the preparations. They'd done more politics than anything lately and Luke was starting to take for granted just how much effort went into making their ideas come to fruition.

Though it had been a lot of hard work, it was nothing compared to the effort and the sacrifices made to get here. So many late nights, long roads and devastating losses lined the path they'd walked; it was so hard to grasp the immensity of it all that Luke shied away from the thought. He didn't want to weigh himself down with the burden of the friends he'd lost... Ion would never forgive him for that. For them, and for everyone who still lived in the world, replicas and originals alike, they couldn't falter now.

Luke sat back against the stone wall, taking a break above the now semi-deserted street. Below him he could hear the rustle of the merchant over whose stall he was sitting as the man packed away the last of his wares. The weapons and arms dealers had an especially fruitful few weeks with the surge of troops from both countries but the entire city had flourished with the increase in business. Now it was down to the wire, the final 24 hours before they departed; when the men were given leave to do what they pleased... in case they didn't come back. It felt like such a morbid practice when Luke first heard about it from Jade, and even though Luke didn't want to entertain the thought of any of his friends not returning... he understood the importance of that time.

Important or not... Luke honestly didn't know what to do with his 24 hours. If this really was to be his last day, there was nothing he could do that would leave him with nothing to regret. The more he thought about it, the more he realized he still had so much he wanted to do. This wasn't the end, it was the beginning! He had places he wanted to go, people he wanted to visit again; he wanted to put flowers at Iemon and Tamara's graves, he wanted to walk the streets of St. Binah, he wanted to laugh with the people of Engeve. The world was finally at peace, people could finally go back to their everyday lives... and the world he'd come to love would soon be as beautiful as it had been the first time he'd seen it.

A sigh escaped Luke's lips at the thought, it was a dilemma he realized that he'd never really solved, one that had haunted him since the day he'd been swept from the manor. The mystery of his own future remained a mystery, even to him; so while he casually dismissed it as irrelevant given his circumstances, that statement contradicted everything he had decided he would live for. He would live believing that tomorrow would come, and that meant he had to make choices he wasn't sure he was ready for yet. Sacrifices he didn't want to fathom.

"There you are," Asch's voice rose above the sounds of the street below. Like the rest of the city, Asch was bathed in the sunset's light, something that made his hair burn an even fiercer red against the orange hues of the city. Luke offered his sibling a smile that he found relayed back at him. Asch eyed his perch sceptically but Luke simply shrugged. Let Asch figure it out.

Asch stood staring at his sibling for a brief moment, assessing how he'd reached his vantage point rather than why Luke decided to spend his day there. A quick survey of the area gave him the answer; several stacks of crates in the alley made it a simple leap over. Smart; it was far less stifling up there than mixed in with the crowds. Asch almost wished he'd thought of it. Scaling the
crates was easy and in a minute Asch was sitting next to his brother.

"Nice spot," Asch commented. Luke shrugged it off but Asch genuinely meant it. From where they sat, they could peer though the buildings and catch the sun as it began to descend over the water. He could also see the other reason Luke sat here. Along the edges of the city, buildings sat in ruin, half crumbling like some massive earthquake had toppled them. It was only one of the many places here in the city that had never quite recovered.

"So what are you thinking about up here all by yourself?" Asch asked.

"I don't know," Luke replied. "What we're going to do, what's going to come after that. The future, I guess."

"And what did you come up with?"


"Oh come on, you must have some idea." Asch retorted. "Once Van is gone and the world is safe, what are you going to do?"

Luke rolled his eyes. "Now you're just being stupid; I'm coming home with you."

"Really?"

"Of course!"

"Is that really what you want?" Asch asked in a serious tone that destroyed Luke's indignation. Luke fell silent. "You and I both know that the Kimlascan nobility is not where you belong, or where you want to be."

"You sound so sure of that." Luke stated, failing to sound as offended as he was pretending to be.

"I've been sure of it since I watched you helping me in court," Asch replied with every degree of seriousness. "You don't like the politics, the restrictions; that stuffy life isn't for you. Maybe you don't see it like the rest of us do, but you're never happier than when you're out on an adventure. The world is a big place and we haven't seen half of it. Maybe someday you'll be happy settling down somewhere, but right now you and I both know being cooped up in Baticul would only make you miserable."

"I wish I could be as certain of that as you seem to be."

"What's making you hesitate?" Asch asked, leaving his sibling at a bit of a loss for an answer.

"I don't know... I just, I can't picture it. I can't imagine myself doing anything! Least of all alone..." Luke added so silently Asch barely caught it. Asch smiled gently, catching the meaning that Luke couldn't give voice to.

"Would you consider joining the Oracle Knights? Move to Daath to be closer to Tear? I'm sure once all this chaos is settled they'll have a few openings for the positions of the God-Generals. Our recent adventures might have left them a few short."

Luke let out a weak laugh, shaking his head.

"What's so funny?" Asch inquired. He'd genuinely thought it a viable option for his sibling who, even if he didn't see it, had some good leadership skills and a lot to offer in the way of battle.
Besides, Asch knew Luke had a good enough head on his shoulders not to mindlessly follow any stupid orders.

"No, it's not that," Luke said, picking up on the offended tone in Asch's voice. "It's just that back before we went to Akzeriuth, that was what Van offered me to get me to go along with things. He said that if I handled everything in Akzeriuth, then he'd give a position as a God-General. I just have a hard time considering it without remembering everything that happened back then. Just the thought leaves a bad taste in my mouth."

"I see," Asch replied, fully understanding his sibling's reasoning. "But, that's only one possibility; there are thousands upon thousands of things that you can do. No matter what happens, there will always be a place out there for you, you just have to go discover it."

"You make it sound so easy."

"It isn't easy, but you know... I always envied that about you," Asch confessed.

"What's that?"

"You've got an entire world of opportunities laid out in front of you. You can do whatever you want to do, whenever you want to do it. You have a freedom I could never dream of. Even if you don't know what to make of it right now, you'll see just how much of a gift it is."

"I'm lucky? You're the one that's lucky! You've always had a place you belong in, a role you fit into that no one else could do. You've always known exactly what you have to do and you work so hard to get there. I wish I had that kind of stability and motivation. You're always much better than I am at things, and everyone respects you for it. You're always the one that can do something to help others, me... I'm helpless most of the time."

"Not at all," Asch replied. "You're far from helpless, you have your friends and you always will. You've got a way with others, you can make friends with anyone; I mean look at Jade."


Asch chuckled. "I mean it though, you're able to trust others, and people respond to that. I've never been able to reach out to people like you do. They may respect me for my skills, but they follow you for your smile... and that means a lot more."

"It's kind of funny," Luke said.

"What is?"

"I've spent my life wishing for the things you have... and at the same time you've been doing the same thing."

"Yeah, I wonder how many fights this conversation could have spared."

"None," Luke answered with a quip. "Like I would let reason get in the way of a perfect opportunity to get you grounded."

"You're still a brat," Asch muttered.

"I had to keep you around the manor somehow," Luke said with a sly grin. Asch shot him a dirty look but couldn't resist a chuckle.
"Keep up that attitude and you're going to get yourself into some real trouble somewhere."

Luke sighed, and his lack of reply told Asch he was thinking about his future again. "I know you're right..." Luke finally spoke up. "I just don't know if I can do it all by myself."

"You can do more than you think you can," Asch replied. "You just have to learn how to get started, once you do, I know you'll figure the rest out."

"But... what? What could I possibly do, just me?"

"Don't think about it that way," the young monarch cut his sibling off. "If you could do anything at all, what would you do? Forget all the obstacles in the way, the politics involved, just pretend that you had the power to do absolutely anything you wanted. What would you do?"

"I- I don't know... I'd want to help people, I guess... I want to fix some of the mistakes I've made... the damage I've caused. Places like Chesedonia and St. Binah that are still trying to recover from when we lowered the Outer Lands, I want to fix it all so things could be like they were before all this. I... I would want to..." Luke trailed off.

"You'd want to what?"

"I'd want to rebuild Akzeriuth," Luke said so quietly Asch was strained to catch what he said.

Asch stopped for a moment, somewhat taken aback by Luke's answer. He wasn't entirely sure why it surprised him as much as it did; the more he thought about it, the more he realized it was the only right answer for Luke. After all this time, a part of Asch thought Luke may have finally been able to put the disaster behind him. That was wrong, and seeing the seriousness in his sibling reminded him how foolish of a thought that had been. Luke would never forget the victims, never forget the losses the disaster had wrought... and he was grown up enough to realize how to carry that burden.

"I think that's a great idea," Asch finally replied.

"Yeah, well, it isn't like I would have the time to accomplish something like that anyway," Luke replied, feigning nonchalance.

"Maybe, maybe not. You were right when you said we can't know how much time we have left, and that it would defeat everything we've been fighting for if we were to squander it waiting for the end," Asch said. "The most important thing... is just to live your life staying true to yourself and to what you believe, no matter where you go, what you do, or how much time you have. And who knows, it may only start as a dream, but if others share the same dream then it will stay alive, even after you're gone."

Luke felt a realization and a wave of warmth wash over him with Asch's words. As long as others shared his dreams, his goals... as long as he had his friends who believed in him and the things he'd accomplished... a part of him would always be alive and with them.

"I still have a hard time imagining it without you there to keep an eye on me," Luke admitted. His mood significantly lightened. He cracked a smile and saw his sibling do the same. "It would just be weird not having you around... it would feel wrong. I just have a hard time swallowing the idea of us being separated... I don't want that. I don't want to be alone."

Asch sighed, his smile still widening. "You'll do just fine. You and I, we each have our own place, our own world where we belong. We may not always be next to each other, but you will never, ever, be alone." Luke smiled; Asch reached out and ruffled his sibling's hair. "No matter where you
go, you'll always be my goofy little brother."

"Yeah, and you'll always be a pain in the ass," Luke retorted attempting to fix the mess Asch had
made of his hair.

"Well there won't be much left of you if you don't go meet Tear like you said you would."

"Crap!" Luke jumped to his feet, sending a layer of dust showering down on the stall below.

"You didn't forget," Asch taunted.

"Not really," Luke shot back with a wink as he leapt to the street below. "Hey Asch,

"What is it?"

"Have you chosen yet?"

"Chosen what?"

"Your path."

Asch froze for a moment before a smile crawled back to his lips.

"Get going before you're late."

"Me too," Luke said with a certainty Asch hadn't heard from him in awhile. The two of them
exchanged a mutual grin; whatever the future would bring, whenever it would come, they would
handle it then, and every day until that time was theirs to live.

Asch remained on the roof for awhile longer, watching as the dipping sun began to spill red across
the horizon. The murmur of activity in the city below was comforting and Asch allowed his
thoughts to drift, to tomorrow, the day after that and the days beyond. The young monarch felt
someone watching him, but he was far too peaceful to pay it any mind. Jade could wait.

"So you'll keep that secret of yours until the end, will you?" Jade's voice rose to his ears all while
seeming quiet enough that the people walking in the streets took no note. Asch turned to face the
man and saw him leaning back against the building, his hands in his pockets; it was the most casual
stance he'd ever seen the Colonel take. It made him seem more human somehow, that even he was
taking in the calm before the storm.

"I don't want to hurt Natalia," Asch answered simply. Asch felt Jade staring from the corner of his
eye. "No, that's not entirely true," the redhead admitted. "I just couldn't take the way she'd look at
me. I couldn't handle the strain, watching her try to pretend nothing was wrong so she wouldn't
make me feel bad. I don't want that. In its own way, that may be much crueler to her... but that's
what I decided. So go ahead, tell me I'm being selfish, give me the breakdown of what's wrong
with my plan."

Silence.

"You're much softer than you pretend to be, you know," Jade noted.

"Your point?"

"Hmph," Jade smirked. "You've changed a great deal. There was a time you'd have dug your own
kidney out with a spoon before admitting to something like that."
"And you've still got the same disturbing analogies."

"Why certainly; at my age it's far too late to change such habits."

"You just keep telling yourself that old man," Asch shot, rolling his eyes. "But whether you're
going to admit it or not, I'm not the only one who ended up a total softie thanks to this crusade. If I
remember right you used to be a stuck up prick who liked to make us all miserable."

"Your assessment is far too generous," Jade said with a mock bow.

"I used to hate you; I hated the way you knew everything and never passed up a chance to shove it
in our faces. I found you obnoxious and insulting."

"Your use of the past tense suggests you feel otherwise," Jade remarked somewhat tauntingly.

"Maybe not about the obnoxious part," Asch shot back. "I may have had to suffer for it, but I've
learnt a lot from you over the past year. You've been like a teacher and a mentor to me. So thank
you."

"My my, what's this? Saying all your goodbyes are you? That's awfully morbid."

"Aren't we the one to talk?"

"I'm quite certain I've no idea what you're trying to imply."

"I'm not saying goodbye," Asch retorted. "I decided I don't want to regret things anymore, and that
means saying the things I've needed to say for a long time. You pretend to be objective and distant,
but you've been watching out for us for a long time."

"What in Yulia's creation gives you a notion such as that?" Jade asked sceptically.

"You haven't said anything about Luke's and my condition," Asch stated simply. "You've been
helping us while not giving off any kind of sign that something's wrong. If you were the same
person as when all this started, you'd have announced it as soon as you had the chance; you'd have
tried to strategically adjust to the possibility of our absence in every situation."

"You sound so certain of your conclusions," Jade stated.

"Of course," Asch retorted. "I learnt how to read people from you."

"I hate teaching," Jade said firmly. "I don't impart knowledge, I don't take apprentices."

"That's fine," Asch replied; jumping down from the ledge, creating a small cloud of sand and dust
at his feet. He took one last look over his shoulder, a cocky grin adorning his face and confidence
dancing in his emerald green eyes. "I've gotten this far haven't I? I'll just take what I need for
myself." Jade smiled as he watched the redhead depart.

"You are more than welcome to try," he replied to no one in particular.

"What was that?" A young female voice pierced above the rustle of a crowd.

"Hello to you too, Anise," Jade replied.

"Fess up!" Anise continued her tirade, lowering her voice somewhat now that she knew she had the
Colonel's attention. "What were you and Asch talking about?"
"I don't see how that bears any consequence to the matters at hand," Jade replied.

"Well you said something. I haven't seen Asch look that happy in like... forever."

"Excluding your escapades in Grand Chokmah last week?" Jade asked slyly.

"Oh shut up," Anise sneered playfully. The Colonel had acted all innocent but every one of them knew he was behind the entire ruckus. Poor Luke hadn't said a word for three days after whatever the Colonel had put him through.

"So," Anise stated, effectively resetting the conversation. "What are you going to do Colonel?"

"Whatever might you be referring to?"

"Oh come on," Anise grumbled. "You know what I mean. What are you going to do once all of this is over?"

"Must I do anything?"

"I'm just curious!" Anise stated, her voice edging on frustration. "Are you going to go back to the military or what?"

"Thinking of joining me?" Jade asked tauntingly.

"Me? No way! I've got way bigger goals than being your lap dog for the next ten years." Anise protested and Jade chuckled.

"No, I don't imagine I'll go back," Jade confessed. "Working with you lot has left me a bit too lazy for active duty."

"Hey!"

"I was merely stating the truth."

"Well then what are you going to do?"

"Really Anise, why the interest?" Jade asked. "I assure it is nothing that will make me enough money to be worthy of your attention."

"Booooo," Anise stuck her tongue out. "You're no fun at all. Besides! I've given up on marrying rich. I don't want to be tied down to some boring old fogey; I've got way more important things to be doing.

"Oh? And what could be more important than your never-ending search for an easy and luxurious life?"

"I want to follow in Ion's footsteps," Anise admitted in a more serious tone. "You know, I really admired what he was doing with the Order. Not everyone liked it, but the changes he was making were for the better, and if he'd had the chance to finish what he wanted to do, everyone would have seen how wonderful things can be without the Score. I want to finish what he started... I want to rebuild the Order the way he dreamed it could be."

"That's quite the endeavour," Jade pointed out. "It won't be easy."

"Yeah I know," Anise stated. "But it'll get way easier once I become the first female Fon Master!"
"I wish you the best of luck in that regard."

"Hey! What's that supposed to mean!" Anise demanded.

"Nothing, I assure you," Jade shrugged.

"You don't think I can do it, do you?"

"Can you not take anything I say seriously?"

"No."

Jade smirked. "Well then in that case, I should inform you that as soon as we've defeated Dorian General Grants, I intend to free Dist from his imprisonment and with him hold His Majesty's rappigs captive until he agrees to declare Keterburg an independent nation."

"You suck Colonel," Anise stuck her tongue out.

"No, that would be rather counter-productive of me, now wouldn't it?" Jade continued. "I think instead perhaps I'll return to my research, the world will be in dire need of a new source of energy with the Planet Storm gone, and I'm afraid it's already in dire need of more knowledge on the replica populace it's recently adopted."

"You're going to take up fomicry again?" Anise asked.

"I think so," Jade feigned nonchalance. "I should hate to see them all die from lack of care after all the effort put into sparing their lives. None should ever have to succumb to such a fate when there would be a means to avoid it if only we'd known more."

"Yeah, that's true. Research has been illegal all this time so there really isn't much out there," Anise agreed. Jade remained conspicuously silent.

"Well I think that's a great idea!" Anise broke the silence. "With you working at it we'll know everything in no time!"

"Not soon enough," Jade muttered under his breath.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, dear Anise. Nothing at all."

Asch wandered Chesedonia's streets, the setting sun slowly emptying the stalls of their patrons as everyone scurried home before the cold desert night set in. With all the military activity, much of Chesedonia's night life had been put on hold, and other than the odd person heading for the bar, after sundown the Trade Center was unusually quiet. Asch hadn't really any idea where he was going, just wandering, letting his feet take him where they would, and before he knew it, he was down by the pier listening to the sound of the waves as they crashed against the docks.

"I should have known I'd find you down here," A familiar voice turned Asch's head. Natalia smiled when Asch's eyes met her own and the redhead extended a hand, inviting her to join him.

Natalia sat nervously, watching the water, pacing her breath with the waves lest she grow flustered and alarm her fiancé. Twice she opened her mouth to speak but could not bring the words forth, how could she voice such fears? Ask questions with implications so dark and so cruel she didn't even want to consider them... she simply couldn't. Not here... not now. Not when the world was
quiet and Asch finally seemed at peace. So instead she remained silent, keeping her conversations with Guy to herself and listening to the water beat against the pier in time with her heart.

The nervous silence grew comfortable, and then warm as they sat, their feet dangling above the waves, bathed in the sun's setting glow. Natalia rested her head against her fiancé's shoulder, taking in the last rays of sun and the warmth of the person beside her. This warmth would always be there, right? The comfort of his embrace, the deep beating of his heart that always put her nerves to rest... they would be hers forever... she simply had to believe that. She simply couldn't consider the alternative. If she trusted in nothing else, she would trust in him, in his words to her all those years ago. The worries, the fears, they could wait. If there was a single instant in time she would like to become trapped in, this was it. This moment was theirs.

"It doesn't seem so long ago, does it?" Natalia finally asked.

"What doesn't?"

"That we used to sit on Baticul's pier like this," she replied. "Watching the sun, the ships come in and out of port. Things were so simple back then."

"It doesn't seem that long ago," Asch agreed. "And yet..."

"It feels like a lifetime ago," Natalia finished for him.

Asch smiled.

"I still remember when I first began this journey, that ferry to Akzeriuth. I spent the entire way there angry with all the attention you were giving Luke," Natalia said with a chuckle. "I was so foolish."

"We all were," Asch replied. "We had no idea what was going on around us, we went in completely blind and we all paid the price for it. Then... well things haven't stopped since then."

"No they haven't," Natalia agreed. "Even that brief moment of peace after the Absorption Gate didn't feel as such. I'm looking forward to the opportunity to relax a little once everything has been cleared up."

"I still haven't forgotten that promise I made you," Asch stated.

"Promise?" Natalia quickly racked her brains but couldn't for the life of her come up with anything. Her heart started to race, she hadn't forgotten something important, had she? "W-What promise?"

She asked hesitantly.

"On the way to Akzeriuth, I promised you that once everything was done we would do something special, just for the two of us," Asch put his arm around Natalia and pulled her closer.

"Oh that promise," Natalia said, relieved it wasn't as dire as she'd feared it might be. "Really, you needn't worry about it. You've already done so much for me... I couldn't imagine anything more."

"No," Asch protested, bringing himself to his feet. "There's something I have to do... something I've owed you for a long time."

"What is that?" Natalia asked, looking up at his determined emerald eyes.

Asch took his hand in Natalia's and knelt down so their eyes were locked. "Once I asked you this, but after everything that has happened, I owe it to you again. I'm not who I was back then, and
neither are you. Both of us have changed; we've been through a lot together and I believe we've come out better people for it. So I ask this not just of Princess Natalia, but of you, the woman who is in front of me right now."

"Asch..." Natalia grew flustered. The air caught in her lungs and she could scarcely breathe through the fluttering of her heart. She knew the words that would come; she knew and yearned to hear them with all her heart, every fibre of her being. Her every desire cumulated in this moment.

"Together, let's change this world. Change it so no one has to be poor, so no one has to suffer for things they can't control. Change it so that war never happens, so people can live out their lives to the fullest. Will you work together with me to change our world? For the rest of our lives... together."

Natalia felt the tears in her eyes; the heart that beat in her throat as she watched her every dream come true. Whatever may lie in the future no longer mattered. They would face it together.

"Yes. With you, Asch. Forever."

Natalia threw herself into her fiancé's arms, and there she remained until the last of the sun's rays faded from the horizon.

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"What are you doing out here all by yourself?"

Guy looked over his shoulder and saw Noelle smiling at him, but returned his gaze to the water before him. Chesedonia's Eastern beaches weren't quite as nice as the Western ones, but rumour had it a certain couple was planning to meet there later so the blond was just as content to relax on this side of the city. The company over here wasn't so bad anyway.

Noelle stood beside Guy, watching him as he seemed lost in thought. She'd been kind of worried about him lately, something was on his mind that was weighing him down; something other than the impending events that tomorrow would bring. He seemed lighter tonight though, as if he'd made a decision of some sort. Noelle suspected she'd never figure out the particulars, but that was okay with her. Some things you just need to figure out for yourself. If nothing else, she was glad to see he'd sorted it all out before tomorrow.

Guy glanced back down at Noelle, chuckling to himself when she quickly averted her gaze. The blonde pilot was going to be flying them to Eldrant tomorrow, with her older brother flying decoy. Given how often they used the Albiore, Jade had decided it would be the more obvious target and it would be safer to let it fly decoy while taking the Albiore II. He couldn't say he liked the idea of either of them up there taking on Eldrant's aerial artillery but if anyone had proven themselves able it was Noelle and Ginji.

"Are you ready for tomorrow?" Guy asked her.

"Are you kidding? I was born ready!" She declared energetically. Guy gave her a sceptical glance. "Okay maybe not entirely," she confessed. "I don't think anyone's ready for tomorrow. I mean, we're deciding our future. Either we win it all, or we lose it all; there's no more postponements."

"That's true," Guy agreed. "It's do or die from here on out."

"Give me break," she teased. "It's always do or die with you guys."

Guy chuckled. "You may be right. To be honest I really wish things didn't have to end this way."
"You used to be friends with Van, didn't you?"

"How do you know that?" Guy exclaimed.

"A little redheaded birdie told me," she said with a wink.

"Which one?"

"My lips are sealed."

"Luke."

"Who knows, maybe they were switched," she said with a laugh that Guy couldn't help but echo. She was glad to see a smile back on his face. Something about seeing him sad made her heart break.

"Yeah, Van and I were friends," Guy said. "We practically grew up together. I always looked up to him, believed that he could do no wrong. I'm not that naive anymore. I know we've reached this point not because one of us is right and one of us is wrong, but because our beliefs of what it right for this world differ, and neither of us can afford to concede. He was always stubborn, maybe even more so than Asch."

"Really?"

"Well, maybe not," Guy said with a chuckle. "I guess tomorrow will tell us the answer to that."

"You know..." Guy continued after a pause. "Van always watched over me; I would cower in fear while he defended me, I lost track of how often. He'd tell me to be strong, that I had to stand on my own, but he would still be there to defend me the next time. Now we're on opposite sides of the battlefield... now it's time for me to show him how strong I've become. That I can stand on my own two feet and defend the people I care for, even if it means destroying him."

"I'm sorry," Noelle said genuinely, holding Guy's hand for comfort. "Oh my gosh, I'm sorry!" She suddenly realized, dropping her hold. Guy only smiled. "Wow, you really are over it, aren't you?"

"Yeah," the Malkuth noble said with a soft smile. "Cantabile made me realize it; how I see the past is entirely up to me. I can choose to see only the hate and destruction like she did, or I can choose to remember the good along with the bad. The bad things will always be there, but as long as I remember the happy times, it becomes more bearable." Guy placed his hand back in Noelle's. "I'm glad I can remember my sister with joy and respect, not repulsion and fear."

"I think that's exactly what she would have wanted you to do. Mary and Cantabile, they both would have wanted you to be happy."

"I'd like to believe that," Guy agreed.

"Then believe," Noelle answered simply. "That's all it takes. Believe in a better world, and slowly you will begin to see it happen. You guys showed me that. It seems impossible at first, but you just need to believe in the possibility, and before you know it, you'll be flying through the skies."

Noelle let go of her companion and ran towards the water, the sunset casting an orange glow over her brilliant smile. The waves lapped around her feet and she spun around, never losing her carefree grin.

"I believe that tomorrow will be only the beginning," she said.
Guy reciprocated her smile.

"Then that's all you need."

It had been a long time since Luke had really taken the time to appreciate the night sky. The stars erupted into a brilliant canvas over his head, like the morning dew at first light, shadowed only by the full moon that hung enchantingly among them. It seemed bigger than usual, somehow, Luke thought, and the way its light sparkled on the water reminded Luke of the night everything had begun in Tataroo Valley. The quiet night air still held onto the warmth from the day despite the cool breeze that tossed his hair about.

"Am I late?" Luke turned to face Tear's voice, wearing a warm smile that lit up his face.

"Not at all."

"You're still a terrible liar," Tear replied.

"And you used to be more punctual," Luke shot playfully.

"You said after sunset," Tear pointed out. "It's after sunset." Luke chuckled, extending his hand to his companion. She accepted it and Luke pulled her into his arms.

Tear found herself gently wrapped in Luke's embrace and sank into the gesture, letting his warmth penetrate her core. She could feel her heart racing, yet was somehow completely at peace in the same breath. Here, the waves lapping the shore, her feet warm in the sand, she couldn't help but wish that tomorrow would never come. That she would never have to face her brother, that she wouldn't have to watch him die... she wished that her life could be as simple as her and Luke in this moment, where nothing mattered but the moonlight dancing on the ocean.

But tomorrow would come, and Tear wasn't sure she was ready for it. It was strange, she began this journey completely prepared for how it would end, and here she was on the doorstep of accomplishing everything she had set out to do, and she didn't want to cross that threshold. She knew she would, she had to; her brother had left her no choice! If she didn't act the entire world would perish... but that didn't mean she wanted to. She didn't want anyone else close to her to die.

Was it Luke that had changed her so much? Was it this incredible and cheerful person in whose arms she found herself that had completely destroyed the walls surrounding her? His smile, his energy... and the way he valued life in all shapes and forms had completely shifted her perspective. Once she hadn't cared about the casualties, death was inevitable on the battlefield. In order for one to stand victorious, the enemy had to die, even if the enemy was her brother. Those who fought went into battle prepared for that fate, so there was no sense in shedding tears for the fallen... yet Luke had.

Time and again she watched Luke mourn the loss of life, watched him try to protect that life at all costs, even when it meant putting his own on the line. She began to respect him, to cherish the way he lived so fully. The life he had was so much more than a disposable commodity; it was something beautiful, something to be protected. Then she had almost lost him. Faced with the thought that she would never see Luke again, her heart had completely seized up, her stomach turned to knots and thinking about it even now was enough to make her want to disappear. She didn't want to ever feel that way again, about anyone. Did she really have the courage to look her brother in the eye and send him to his grave?

"It's hard to believe tomorrow is already here," Luke said softly, breaking the silence. Tear looked
back at her companion and his distant gaze told her his thoughts weren't so far from her own.

"It's been so long in coming, and so much has happened, even since the last time we faced my brother. The day I broke into your manor feels like such a distant memory," Tear admitted. "Things are so different now."

"Some for the better," Luke agreed, squeezing Tear's hand. Tear smiled and returned the gesture, but the unsaid words hung in the air.

Some for the worst.

Though they'd accomplished a lot, they also lost a great deal, and even the deaths of their enemies were heavy blows. Some cities were still recovering, others were lost for good. The citizens were anxious and the entire world was in a state of upheaval. They carried with them the hopes of all the people they'd met along the way, and the millions that they hadn't.

"Are you going to be okay?" Luke asked.

"I should be the one asking you that," Tear said, and she meant it. He carried the heaviest burden of them all, and he carried it with a smile.

"I honestly don't know," Luke confessed. "I'm trying not to think about it because it puts knots in my stomach. Just thinking about the immensity of what we're doing and the thought of facing Master Van... it's not going to be easy."

"I wish there was another way," Tear confessed. "I know my brother has done awful things, but I still don't want to see him die."

"Then let's try talking to him one last time," Luke stated simply.

"Luke, after all this time, he's not going to just give up now. We've tried talking to him; he simply won't change his mind!"

"We can still try!" Luke insisted. "Not just for you, for everyone who cares about him. He was Guy's friend, and Legretta still cares about him. He was my instructor too; I won't give up on him until I know for sure there's no other way."

"And if there isn't any other way?" Tear asked, her voice barely a whisper.

"Then remember that you have friends now," Luke replied. "You won't be alone."

Tear couldn't help the smile that spread across her face; was she really that transparent? Luke saw right through her; her fears, her hesitation... she was a book he'd learnt to read with frightening skill, but surprisingly she didn't mind. Instead it comforted her. It was nice to have someone who understood; it was nice not to be alone.

The only thing that bothered her, the small thorn in her happiness was that the feeling was not reciprocated. As Luke had learned to read her, he in turn had become more of an enigma. The more she learnt, the less she realized she knew, and the boy whose actions she could have almost predicted once was now shrouded in secrets. She could see it in his eyes when he looked at her. She could see the inkling of regret, the flicker of a sorrow buried so deep within she could never reach it.

Tear trusted Luke when he said he wasn't hiding anything from her, but on the same token, she knew that such a statement could never be completely truthful. Everyone carried things with them
that they didn't share, feelings they couldn't reveal, sometimes because they themselves didn't even know such things were buried within. So Tear was satisfied, she knew Luke would eventually share whatever it was with her in time. After tomorrow, they would have an entire life ahead of them, a future in which they had all the time in the world.

"I'm thinking of leaving the Oracle Knights," Tear confessed, unsure what had brought forth that issue from where she'd buried it in the back of her mind. Perhaps it was all these thoughts of the future that had her thinking about it again. Perhaps, she just wanted to talk about it with someone; perhaps she just wanted Luke's support.

"I thought you might," Luke replied, not at all fazed by the turn in conversation.

"Really?" Tear asked, taken somewhat aback by Luke's lack of surprise.

"Well you became a member of the Oracle Knights for Van's sake, right?" Luke asked. "I guess I kind of figured once all this was over you'd do something else. No offense or anything, but being a soldier doesn't really suit you that well anymore."

"Is that so?" Tear asked, trying to sound offended. She obviously failed, because Luke started to chuckle.

"Or maybe it was just wishful thinking on my part," Luke added playfully. "I like Daath and all, but I don't fancy living there. So if you're leaving the Oracle Knights, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet," Tear confessed. "I'm pretty pathetic, aren't I? I don't even have any kind of plan as to how I'm going to support myself, or how I'm going to live. I just know that I don't want to be a soldier anymore."

"Well if it's pathetic, then we're both pathetic because I don't have any more idea what I want to do with my life than you do. I've thought and thought and thought about it but I can never come up with anything."

"Try not to get too frustrated," Tear said calmly. "You're only eight; it's not surprising that you're uncertain about what you want to do with your life. Things will fall into place, you'll see."

"That's what Asch has always said. He says that there are thousands of possibilities out there for me, I just have to find my place."

"He's right."

"I know he's right," Luke argued. "What he doesn't understand is that that's the problem. There are so many things I could do; I don't even know where to start thinking about it. The thought of deciding what to do with the rest of my life... it scares me."

"Don't be afraid," Tear answered reassuringly, rubbing Luke's arm that was still embracing her. "Don't think of it so definitively. The future is fluid; it's always changing. Nothing is certain, that's what my brother can't understand. He can't accept that no single choice lasts forever, that people can turn around and fix their mistakes. I believe that now; you've shown me how things always change, how life will never stop surprising you. You certainly haven't stopped surprising me."

"The way you say that... I don't know if I should be taking it as a compliment or not."

"Take it however you want to," Tear replied, turning around to face Luke. "You don't need to know what your future will bring; that's what is so amazing about a world without the Score. You can just live life, and carve your own place. No one will tell you where, no one will tell you how. It's
hard, and people will make mistakes, but I believe that is what makes life worth living. It's our mistakes that shape the people we are, our missteps that allow us to grow."

"You know," Luke commented, "Sometimes I wonder why Yulia made the choice she did."

"What choice is that?"

"The decision to create Score," he explained. "She knew what path it would lead the world down, then she deliberately chose to hide the final fonstone, misleading everyone into thinking it would end in prosperity. When deciding between freedom and an inflexible, inescapable future... why did she choose the latter?"

"Maybe she didn't," Tear replied. "The Score gave her a means of saving the people and the world that she loved more than anything. She chose to hide the truth of the Score because she knew her choice was wrong but couldn't bear to hurt those people. As long as they would live, as long as they could be happy that was enough."

"It just seems kind of contradictory," Luke stated, "She wanted to save them and yet she knew she was condemning them. She was only buying time."

"Are we really any different?" Tear asked. "We lowered the Outer Lands, silenced the core, shut off the Planet Storm all to buy ourselves the time we needed to accomplish our goals. Maybe she was the same... Maybe..."

"Tear? What is it?"

"That's it!" Tear exclaimed. "The final hymn, I understand! Yulia wanted the Score to be overturned. I can't believe I'd forgotten... it was my brother, it was Van who told me once. He told me that Yulia wanted to see the Score overturned, because she loved the world. The proof of that lies in the fonic hymns; they were a pact offered to Lorelei out of that love."

"And Lorelei returned that love by offering her the Key," Luke replied.

"What do you mean?"

"It's nothing," Luke dismissed it. "I think I understand something Lorelei said to me once, but it isn't important. What is important is that you remembered the Seventh hymn."

"Van used to sing it to me as a lullaby," Tear recalled fondly. "It was the symbol of trust between Yulia and Lorelei, proof of their love for the world, their faith that we could build our own future."

"That's why I think we'll need the hymn to free Lorelei," Luke pointed out. "The Key is only half of the pact; you need to sing your hymn to awaken Lorelei, to give him the strength to fight Master Van. It's the only way."

"I don't know if I can," Tear confessed. "I only just remembered it, I don't know if I have the lyrics, the melody or if the meaning is even right."

"You solved all the other hymns; I know you can solve this one too."

"Thank you Luke."

Luke sighed, averting his gaze but Tear didn't miss the sorrow that swept across his face. Tear could see the struggle in eyes, the internal conflict that waged as he fought with an impossible decision. He saw her concern and tried to smile but the gesture was pained.

"No," Luke replied. "All the talk of the future and of freeing Lorelei keeps reminding me of something."

"What is it? I may not be able to help you, but I'll listen."

"No," Luke insisted. "Because I made a choice; it's just that following through with it is hard sometimes, but I really do believe it's for the best."

"Then when the future becomes difficult, remember that conviction," Tear said, her blue eyes piercing his own.

"Well there is one thing I know about my future," Luke finally said with a soft smile. "Whatever future I have, I want to spend it with you."

Tear felt her cheeks flush as Luke stepped in closer. "I would like that."

"I love you, Tear," Luke said, so close that Tear could feel the warmth of his breath, the softness of his skin against hers.

"I love you too, Luke," Tear replied, leaning in to his gesture, her lips brushing against his.

And there, on the moonlit beaches of Chesedonia, Luke and Tear shared their first kiss.

The sun rose on a silent city. The streets that had been packed the day before were bare; desert winds blew dust about and clattered wooden shutters that hadn't been sealed against the previous night's chill. A few hours ago saw the streets lined with soldiers, the piers full of ships but each and every one had since deployed, leaving only Asch, his friends and the two Albiores in the empty port. Asch didn't doubt life would return once they left, but until the entire operation was underway and out of sight, the citizens didn't dare stray outdoors.

The mission would commence at noon, but the Albiores were much quicker than either navy leaving them to wait for their allies to get into place before they could commence. The ships would open fire on Eldrant as soon as they arrived, leaving an opening for them to penetrate the fortress' defences from below. They would fly in first, with Ginji following behind them. The first ship would be most likely assumed to be the decoy so by having Ginji follow rather than lead, he could draw most of the fire. Once they landed, their primary objective was to stop Van and free Lorelei, but they would try to disarm the aerial artillery as best they could in the process.

"Don't think so hard," Guy commented elbowing Luke's ribs, his voice rising above the rumble of the Albiore II's engine as it roared to life and pulled out off the port.

"But don't stop thinking altogether," Jade stipulated with a smirk. "Let us not forget precisely who our opponent is."

"We're taking on Van Grants himself," Natalia stated in agreement.

"And he's going to be desperate," Tear added. "I wouldn't put anything past him at this point; we need to be on our guard for anything."

"The hardest part may very well be not running ourselves ragged before even encountering the man," Jade pointed out. "At all costs we must not work ourselves up to the point that we're worn out, understood boys?"
"Why are you directing that comment at us?" Luke and Asch demanded simultaneously.

"Gee, let's think about that," Anise said with a giggle.

"She's right," Natalia admitted. "You are the ones we're most concerned about. You do have a tendency to go overboard at times."

"Shut up," Asch shot.

"She's kind of got a point," Luke confessed.

'Traitor.'

'Are you ready for this?' Luke asked solemnly.

'Does it matter?'

'Point taken.' Ready or not, it was here and there was nothing either of them could do about it. 'Just don't be reckless,' Luke teased.

'That's my line,' Asch shot back. 'I'm not the one who almost got shot last time.'

'No mistakes this time,' Luke said seriously, catching his sibling off guard. 'We're both making it home.'

'We're both making it until the end,' Asch agreed; the change in wording not lost on the younger redhead. Regardless he smiled reassuringly.

"Are you guys ready?" Noelle shouted back to her passengers. "We're just about in range of Eldrant's aerial artillery."

Jade glanced at his timepiece, both hands standing straight up. "We're right on schedule."

"Alright," Luke said with fiery determination. "For everyone who's helped us get this far, for the world we have to protect no matter what." Luke glanced sideways and caught a reassuring nod from Asch.

"Let's do this!"
The Meaning of Birth

Before anyone knew what to think, the air was alive around them. Within seconds of entering Eldrant's firing range, they were showered by the enemy's weaponry, much of which seemed to have been designed with them in mind. The cannons followed the Albiores as they raced through the skies, not caring which ship they fired at. Ginji's attempt at being a decoy was failing; both ships equally drew the fire, leaving neither with the opportunity to break through. Jade wasn't terribly surprised, though perhaps a bit disappointed; still he gave their commandant friend more credit than that. He wouldn't take the chance that they'd divided their forces between the two vessels. In his eyes, both had to fall.

The roar of cannon fire echoed from below as the Malkuth navy began their assault. Fonon cannons fired massive assaults that did little but chip away at Eldrant's stone base. Each explosion sent boulders flying into the ocean, reverberating in the water and sending the smaller ships askance. The massive floating fortress retaliated, but there were few cannons left to stave off the ships; they had all been reassigned to provide defence against an aerial assault. It shouldn't take long for the navy to knock out Eldrant's lower artillery, but the cannons that were challenging Ginji and Noelle's respective skills would remain beyond their firing range. Breaking through would be up to the pilots alone.

Noelle flew around the island's southern side, turning sharply to avoid the shot of a cannon that blazed through the air a foot shy of the wing. A second shot grazed the Albiore's underside and the entire airship shook. Anise let out a cry and clung to Natalia's arm, who seemed equally attached to Asch on her other side. Only the redhead's white knuckles clutching the seat revealed he was as tense as everyone else aboard. Noelle made a second pass, but was forced back by a barrage of cannon fire.

Jade glanced from the window as Noelle made a wider pass; the Kimlascan navy was having little more success than their Malkuth counterparts. Van had planned for this moment well. He knew there was no access to his stronghold save by air, thus the military posed little threat, even if they overcame his meagre assault on them. He had saved his power for where it mattered, a strategy that may just be their undoing.

"Hang on everyone," Noelle called back to her passengers. "I'm going to try and break through the Eastern side where there's less cannon fire."

"Be careful," Jade replied sternly. "It may be a trap."

Noelle nodded to acknowledge Jade's words but she was already in the process of bringing the Albiore around. Suddenly a huge shadow cast over the Albiore II and the blonde pilot swerved sideways; the hand not on the wheel grabbed the radio in a heartbeat. "Ginji!" Noelle shouted. "What do you think you're doing? This is not the time to be cutting me off!"

"I'll cover you," Ginji's voice came through the speakers. "You won't be able to break through alone."

"Ginji, you can't! There's no way for both of us to make it through that fire," Noelle retorted.

"Then you'd better be the one to make it through." The radio cut out.

"Damn it Ginji!" Noelle cursed, slamming the radio back into place.
"Is he going to be okay?" Luke asked worriedly.

"He better be!" Noelle snapped, stress getting the better of the normally cool-headed girl. "Cause he's going to get a piece of my mind once we're out of this mess!"

The first Albiore picked up speed, passing in front of its sister vessel in a wide arc that pulled the cannon fire behind it. Noelle heard her companions questioning her brother's safety but she tuned their voices out. If anyone had the talent to pull off a stunt like this, it was Ginji, and she wasn't about to screw this up when he was sticking his neck out for them. The blonde pilot felt her muscles tense, her knuckles turned white on the wheel and everything around her dissolved save for the air in front of her, alight with cannon fire.

The ship shook, Noelle had cut it too close and another shot had grazed the hull. She pulled left and escaped the follow up assault. A sharp turn to the right and the sound of an explosion shattered her concentration. Before Noelle could even ponder the source, her entire windshield was engulfed in black smoke. Instinctively her hands flew to the controls, testing each wheel and lever; everything was responsive. No indicators lit up revealing any damage, but if it wasn't her ship...

"Ginji!"

Noelle pulled up, escaping the smokescreen just in time to watch the first Albiore plummet towards the floating isle. She heard all her passengers run over to the left side where the first Albiore had taken the hit. No.. it couldn't be...

"Noelle..." A voice came from behind her, and Noelle shook her head in attempts to clear it, not even registering who had spoken. The cannons were following Ginji down, trying to destroy his ship completely. This was it! She wasn't going to let his efforts be in vain!

"He'll be fine!" Noelle yelled back to no one in particular. "He survived the Megiorra Highlands; this is nothing compared to then. It'll take way more than that to take my brother down. Everyone hang on, I'm not wasting this chance!"

"Noelle, back off." Jade commanded.

"No! I can make it before the cannons change their aim!"

"Noelle pull up!" Guy screamed and wide-eyed the pilot reacted, barely making it over the massive cliff face that had suddenly descended upon them. The entire ship shook violently enough to knock Luke and Guy from their seats, the Albiore's belly grinding against the ground before Noelle managed to pull it back into the air. It took every bit of skill the pilot possessed to cut through the forest of stone structures they were tangled in. She turned too late and alarms screamed from the cockpit, the dashboard becoming a dance of flashing lights.

"Damn it!" Noelle cursed violently. "What the hell was that?" The quirky pilot swerved violently to the left barely staying out of Eldrant's fire long enough to compensate for the turbine she'd just lost. They were running out of time, she wouldn't be able to stay airborne much longer. With one last burst from the engines, she managed to pull them up above the island. It took every bit of skill the pilot possessed to cut through the forest of stone structures they were tangled in. She turned too late and alarms screamed from the cockpit, the dashboard becoming a dance of flashing lights.

"Damn it!" Noelle cursed violently. "What the hell was that?" The quirky pilot swerved violently to the left barely staying out of Eldrant's fire long enough to compensate for the turbine she'd just lost. They were running out of time, she wouldn't be able to stay airborne much longer. With one last burst from the engines, she managed to pull them up above the island. What the hell- Noelle barely had time to process what had just occurred as she fought her way through the emergency procedures to keep them in the air. Noelle knew she'd been distracted by Ginji's crash but there was no way she'd gotten that close without realizing it. How had she ended up tangled in the island's buildings? It was like the island had tried to tackle them! That manoeuvre had cost her some critical equipment. A quick glance over the panels showed her more than a few gauges that were reaching their limits. Just a little further... She could hold out that long.
"D- D- D- Did he just throw Eldrant at us?" Anise managed to spit out.

"For lack of a better way of putting it, yes," Jade replied, were it the most natural thing in the world. "Eldrant was propelled into that dive by retrograde memory particle thrust. The Tartarus in the core must have been completely destroyed."

"It's a good thing we stopped the Planet Storm; or the lands would all be sinking right about now," Guy commented, helping Luke back into his seat. "Still, that was an extreme move on Van's part; attacking us with the island itself."

Anise's cursing was drowned out by the earth shattering crash of Eldrant's final descent. Everyone stared in shock, watching the ensuing waves cripple all but the largest of the military's ships. Noelle swerved suddenly throwing them all off balance; the cannons had resumed their fire.

"But why would he do such a thing?" Natalia asked.

"It just goes to show how much of a threat the Key of Lorelei must be to him," Asch replied. "He's willing to sacrifice all the work he's done so far just to be sure he's eliminated it."

"My brother will go to any lengths to stop us," Tear stated.

"He's serious this time," Guy agreed. "We need to be extra careful, there's no saying what he'll throw at us next."

"Funny," Anise said sarcastically.

"Noelle, how is the Albiore?" Asch asked.

"Not good," Noelle confessed, not daring to take her attention from the aerial assault. "We can keep going for now but I don't know how much longer I can keep us up."

"It looks like the crash took out the cannons on the eastern side of the island," Jade pointed out.

"I'm on it," Noelle called.

"Over there!" Luke shouted, pointing to a plume of black smoke near the island's eastern edge. "I can see where Ginji went down!"

"I'll pull in as close as I can! You guys better hang on back there!"

Noelle hadn't been lying when she'd warned them to hang on and the ensuing race was far from the pilot's smoothest landing, but no one's minds were on the shaky ride. All their thoughts rested with the rising tower of black smoke that got closer with each passing second.

Asch practically jumped from the Albiore; a second sooner and the ship would still have been moving. The redhead ran out into the courtyard in which they'd landed, frantically scanning the area but not daring to call out. It was bad enough the smoke would signal Van's guard, he didn't need to be announcing his presence as well. No one was with his likely injured friend and if the soldiers found him before they did, he would be easy picking. Ginji may be able to defend himself in a fray, but Asch didn't fancy him taking on a hoard of trained soldiers. They had to find him!

Noelle had barely turned off the controls and she was right behind Asch, leaving Natalia and her companions to follow suit. Disembarking from the Albiore, the young princess had to stop at the sheer immensity of what she saw before her. From afar the island had seemed so surreal; a model of some structure to be constructed one day, suddenly the sheer immensity of Van's undertakings
came crashing down on her. This was the beginnings of his replica world; he'd brought it into reality, and unless they succeeded, it would one day become the only reality.

"Ginji!" Noelle's cry immediately got Natalia's attention and she looked forward in time to see her fiancé and the blonde pilot running towards a figure in the distance. A sigh and smile graced Natalia's lips; their errant friend was fine, albeit somewhat injured, but given the severity of the crash he'd been in, it seemed trivial. He was alive, and injuries were something she was more than capable of dealing with.

"Hey Noelle," Ginji replied as casually as if they'd met up after an afternoon of shopping. He was leaning against a nearby wall for support, and he cradled his left arm in which he grasped what looked like a large black stone. Several bruises were starting to form near his collar bone, and he likely hid a dozen more under his sky blue jacket.

"You stupid- good-for-nothing- reckless- you- you- idiot!" Noelle finally spat out, tears in her eyes. "What was with that cool act back there? You could have gotten yourself killed! Are you okay?"

"Well the Albiore is totalled," Ginji replied. "But I managed to salvage the hover drive," he said indicating the stone in his limp arm.

"I didn't ask about the stupid ship!"

"I'm okay," Ginji added. "I think I might have dislocated my shoulder but- ahh!" Ginji cried out as Noelle promptly grabbed his arm and set the joint back into place. "Geez Noelle, you could warn me before... Noelle?" The pilot stopped when he heard his sister's sob.

"You're so... so stupid!"

"Hey, I'm really okay," Ginji insisted. "A few bruises here and there but it's nothing a good hot bath won't fix. I'm sorry I scared you," he finally said giving his sister a hug.

"Yes, well, we can certainly blame your brash recklessness on a certain someone you've spent too much time with," Natalia said, eliciting a chuckle from Noelle and a protest from her fiancé. "As for the bruises, those we can fix up for you in no time."

"No, I'll be alright, you guys need to save your strength," Ginji replied.

"Don't be silly," Natalia insisted. "You risked your life to ensure our safe arrival, it's the least we can do."

"No, these will heal just fine on their own. There's going to be worse injuries than this that will need your attention later, right?"

"Really Ginji, you needn't be so stubborn."

"Hey, the world isn't going to end on my watch because I was too big of a baby to handle a few cuts and bruises. I'll be fine; you guys go kick some ass!"

"What will you two do?" Asch asked.

"We might be able to use any surviving parts from the first Albiore to get this one running again," Noelle suggested.

"I don't like that idea," Asch stated outright.
"Asch is right," Jade agreed. "You both need to get as far from here as you can. Eldrant crashed onto dry land, so you should be able to exit the island on foot. There's no doubt Van's forces will come to search the Albiores, it isn't safe to remain here, nor is it safe to have you accompany us. Once the military re-groups they will likely make their way here. Join up with them as soon as you can."

"Will you be alright to travel Ginji?" Asch asked. "I wish one of us could come with you."

"Don't you worry about us, we'll be just fine," Ginji insisted. "We'll be waiting for you guys though, so don't dare think of not coming back!"

"You got it," Asch answered, holding out his hand. "Thanks for everything you've done for us; we'd never have made it this far without you."

"No goodbyes," the pilot insisted. With a huge grin he clapped Asch's outstretched hand. "To all our crazy adventures to come."

Asch grinned. "I'll be looking forward to it."

Guy couldn't quite make out what he was feeling as they walked down Eldrant's streets. It was a strange mix of foreign familiarity with his surroundings all while being completely alien at the same time. He knew these buildings, these landmarks, but the replica was still incomplete and the blue glow of the stone as it grew made the Malkuth noble feel as if he were in a completely different world. Here buildings grew like trees, and statues blossomed like flowers in someone's carefully pruned garden.

One thing the blond didn't remember, though, was the stark lack of colour. Everywhere he looked was white, from the sheer marble walls to the intricately carved arches that loomed over them. The architecture was nothing to scoff at and the consistent attention to detail, even down to the smallest carvings made the entire place nothing short of a work of art. Vaulted ceilings and open chambers created a feeling of grandeur and awe, but in spite of all this, there was one thing that Van's replica Hod most certainly was not. It was not Guy's home.

The island was empty, devoid of life save the odd monster that had taken up residence. No plants, no other people; the entire place seemed hollow. Here there was none of the warmth or mirth that lingered in Guy's memories, just a cold wind that blew through empty streets.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" Anise commented.

"Indeed," Natalia agreed. "It's hard to believe that this is actually Hod. We're standing on an island that was lost to the world over 15 years ago. I can only imagine how much the people who once lived here would want to experience something like this... Truly, fomicry holds incredible potential."

"Fomicry is no different than any other tool," Tear pointed out. "How it is used is up to the one who wields it. It doesn't have to be evil, used properly it could make many people happy."

"It's almost a shame we need to destroy the fomicry facilities here," the princess continued, "With so many people and replicas desperate for a place to live, it could make for a great place for them."

"Unfortunately this land comes at the expense of a much greater surface," Jade reminded her. "Our problems are not so easily solved as that."

"If only," Asch commented.

"Finished or not, it brings back a lot of memories." Guy commented.

"Is this where you used to live?" Luke asked.

"No, but I used to come down here a lot with my father. Our mansion was closer to the island's interior."

"Might you have some idea where Van may be hiding?" Natalia asked.

"I can't say for sure, but at the center of the island there's an old temple that Yulia was supposedly buried in. No one has ever found her tomb though."

"Does that place have some sort of sentimental value to my brother?" Tear asked.

"I don't know if I'd call it sentimental," Guy said. "But according to what he once told me, that's where they were conducting hyperresonance experiments during the war. It's Hod's passage ring."

"It's where they made him destroy Hod," Asch concluded.

"Yeah," Guy replied solemnly.

"Do you remember how to get there?" Tear inquired.

"Sorry, I was only 6 when Hod was destroyed, I don't remember much; just finding that things look kind of familiar. I think if we keep heading for the interior we'll be able to find it; it was a pretty big place if my memory serves me right. The Order had set up in there."

"Perhaps it would be best you take the lead then, Guy," Natalia offered, inviting him to join her at the front of their little band. Jade remained at the rear, ever vigilant for any signs of trouble along with Anise and Tear at his sides. Natalia flashed a smile back at her fiancé as Guy hurried past them to the next intersection, trying to ascertain the right path.

Asch returned Natalia's gesture, but his attention returned to Luke who was walking beside him and had been unusually quiet. Not that he himself had been all that talkative either, Asch would hand it to his friends for keeping up the conversation; everyone was tense, and the nervousness hung in the air around them like a small raincloud they couldn't shake off. For himself and Luke in particular, they may be pretending otherwise, but they both knew it would take a miracle for them to be leaving Eldrant with their friends once all was said and done.

'You doing alright?' Asch asked silently.

'I guess,' Luke replied. 'I don't even know how I should be feeling right now. There's just so much at stake and so much...'

'You're right,' Asch picked up when Luke trailed off. 'There's so much we don't know about the future, and that makes it scary; but that's the kind of world we're fighting for. It's because we don't know what will come that we can have hopes and dreams for the future."

Luke remained silent; it wasn't that he didn't have hopes for the future...

'Cheer up or the others are going to get suspicious,' Asch prodded. Luke cracked a weak smile.

'What would I do without you?''
'You're right,' Asch replied simply. 'You'd be completely useless without me.'

'I would not!' Luke immediately retorted.

'I know,' A sly grin escaped Asch's lips. 'You'd manage just fine. You don't need me or anyone else; you've got plenty of your own ambition.' Luke glowered at being caught in Asch's trap but a smile quickly replaced the scowl.

'Yeah well...' The younger redhead jogged a few feet ahead before spinning around and smiling. 'You make for a nice perk.'

Luke's smile quickly faded as shock swept across his face. The air around him shimmered with fonons and the younger redhead raced to find the source. The whole thing was chaotic, so many fonons everywhere he couldn't pinpoint where they were coming from. Then it was too late.

"Luke, watch out!" Jade's normally calm voice sternly called out a split second too late and the ground beneath the young noble shattered.


"Asch, no!" Jade commanded, realizing in retrospect how foolish an attempt it had been. Asch was far too hardwired; his reflex was to save his sibling, any and all other considerations came second. Luke was too far out for the older sibling to maintain his balance and both redheads plummeted down the hole that had opened up beneath them.

"Damn it! Luke! Asch!" In a heartbeat Guy doubled back to where his friends had disappeared and without even thinking jumped at the opening with full intentions of following them, wherever that abyss may lead. But rather than pass down through the hole, the blond landed in a heap; his legs not expecting any resistance, buckled under him and sent him sprawling over what should be an opening. He stared in shock; he could see below him was what looked like a tunnel burrowing into Eldrant's depths, curving out of sight twenty feet down; there was no way of telling where Luke and Asch ended up.

"What the hell?" Guy demanded, pounding his fist against what should be open air, but instead felt like a solid glass floor.

"Our commandant, never above using a good trick twice," Jade commented still analyzing the damage.

"The same trap he used in the Absorption Gate?" Tear inquired.

"Indeed," Jade confirmed.

"But Guy and I walked right over it," Natalia pointed out. "Why did it not trigger?"

"To my brother Luke and Asch are the only ones who pose a threat," Tear surmised. "Because together they have the Key of Lorelei."

"Tear is likely correct in her assumption," Jade agreed. "The trap was set for them alone. Given that Van has captured Lorelei, setting a trap that reacts to the same fonon frequency couldn't have been that difficult."

"But why can't we get through here?" Guy asked, still pounding at the invisible barricade.

"A barrier," Jade replied simply. "Not unlike the one Tear produces with her hymns if I'm not
mistaken. Activated right after the two passed through it." The melodist immediately leaned in closer to investigate.

"Not exactly the same," she replied. "But it's similar in construction and almost as strong."

"Meaning there's no chance in hell we're getting through it, right?" Anise concluded.

"Come on Jade!" Guy demanded. "Can't you disarm it like you disarmed the traps back in the Absorption Gate? We have to get to them! They could be hurt! Or worse..."

"The hole was constructed to minimize their injuries from the looks of things," Tear pointed out, though she was clearly still worried, equally trying to appease her own fears as she was Guy's. "I doubt it was intended to kill them."

"It isn't as simple as destroying the barrier," Jade replied pointing out the glyphs on the sides of the tunnel that powered the arte. An identical set of glyphs sat five feet below it, and another five more feet below. "Even if we managed to break through this one, there are multiple barriers and it would take far too long to break them all. We're better off finding another way of reaching them."

"Damn it! That's not good enough! What if there isn't another way?"

"Calm down, Guy," Natalia said softly. "If it's truly the Key of Lorelei that Van is after there must be some other way of reaching them. He would need to be able to retrieve it."

"And who's to say he didn't just drop them into some hole with no way out so they never have a chance to use it against him?"

"That would be pointless," Anise stated. "I mean Van knows those two inside and out, right? With no one around to get hurt, they would just use their hyperresonance to get out."

"That could be quite detrimental in its own way," Jade muttered under his breath.

"What do you mean by that, Colonel?" Tear asked.

Jade shook his head. "I was merely thinking that were those two brash enough to try such a stunt they could end up bringing the entire structure down on themselves."

"Well then what are we supposed to do?" Anise demanded in exasperation.

"Simple," Jade replied. "We find them before he does."

"Damn it!" Asch cursed. Fire raced up his shoulder as he rammed into the barrier that sealed off the hole from which they'd fallen just moments earlier. Though it looked like thin air, he might as well be hitting the marble walls that otherwise lined the room they were now in.

"No luck?" Luke asked.

"None," Asch replied. "We aren't getting back out that way.

"Where are we, anyways?"

The boys walked out into the room in which they'd been dropped. Like everything else they'd seen so far, the entire room was white, covered in intricate markings and designs whose meanings had been lost over time. The vaulted ceiling was easily several stories over their heads giving the place an open feel despite their imprisonment. The chamber was huge, bigger even than the entrance hall
in Baticul's castle.

On one end of the room stood a pair of statues, framing between them a staircase climbing upwards towards a solid marble door. The statues appeared to be twins, both in the image of a woman neither of the boys recognized, though their narrow bases left Asch to wonder just how their weight was being supported. Asch's eyes quickly drifted from the statues to the door; it was sealed shut and could give Daath's massive cathedral doors a run for their money. Even if they hadn't been constructed of marble like the rest of the room, Asch doubted they'd be able to force them open.

The other end of the room had an identical staircase, this one leading downwards towards a second door. While it had neither the size nor the weight of the first one, getting it open would not be an easy task. There didn't appear to be any kind of handles or latches on either set of doors and Asch wondered if they were also incomplete like much of Eldrant, or if they were simply not made to open from this side. Either way left him and Luke stuck right where Van wanted them.

"Now what?" Luke asked, also assessing the two possible exits. "I'm not even sure which way would be the right way to go."

"I don't know my way around any more than you do, but I don't think there's any way we're getting those ones open," Asch said, nodding towards the towering marble doors.


"Knowing Van, most definitely."

"Well it isn't like we aren't used to detours," Luke pointed out.

"True, but we can't afford to wear ourselves out now. We still have Sync and Van to contend with and there's no saying if or when we'll meet up with the others; we need to try and avoid any unnecessary confronta-"

Asch was cut off by the massive rumble of the lower doors creaking open. Through them burst several dozen Oracle Knights, their armour clinking in unison as they rushed forward, drowning out the sound of the door until it slammed shut once more. Luke and Asch immediately fell into a defensive position, each other at their backs, staring down the men who had surrounded them.

"Well," Asch spoke up, carefully wrapping his fingers around the sheath of his blade. "So much for plan A."

"Damn it, not again!" Guy cursed, standing under an arch staring at what should be a bridge. Instead all he could see was a faint blue glow in the distance.

"Another dead end?" Natalia inquired.

"Looks like it," Anise replied for the blond whose fist had just smashed yet another hole in the wall. "You'd think the bridges would be the first thing on Van's to-replicate list, how the hell did they ever get around this place?"

"I'm sure they know which passages have been replicated and which have not," Tear pointed out. "If anything it gives them a tactical advantage over potential invaders."

"I'm sorry," Guy spoke up. "I'm trying to help but I just keep leading us to dead ends. At this rate we're never going to find them in time."
"Try not to be so hard on yourself," Natalia said comfortingly. "It's been a very long time, like you've said, and think if it weren't for you we'd just be all the more lost."

"Still, everything looks familiar but with it all being incomplete like this I just can't seem to get my bearings! There has to be more I can do!"

"We're all worried," Tear said. "But I know that Luke and Asch can handle themselves, and they have each other to rely on. We'll find them."

Guy mulled over her words, and knew how true they were. Luke had Asch to look out for him, and they had proven time and again they could take care of themselves, but that same old protective instinct still lingered from their childhood days. How many years had it been his job to watch out for them, to protect them no matter what? Now, here, he should know this place, he should have the advantage... so why? Why couldn't he find them?

How many times had Luke and Asch come through for him? Every time he thought he'd lost everything, they were always there, whether it was Luke with that smile of his or Asch with the harsh words that needed saying, each of them in their own way had saved him. Now it was his turn to pull through for their sake.

There was no doubt in Guy's mind that the boys were the heart of their group. It was always their stubborn strength, their unwillingness to give up and constant drive forward that inspired the rest of them. No one would say it, but everyone could feel it. Without Luke and Asch things just weren't right. They all wanted to get them back as soon as they could.

But more than just wanting them back, they needed them back. Without Luke and Asch they wouldn't be able to free Lorelei, and Guy didn't even want to start considering the implications of that. Sure maybe the rest of them could put a stop to Van, put an end to his plans... but if Lorelei wasn't freed, then what? Guy hadn't the faintest idea, and even Luke and Asch weren't really sure on the details, but there was something about their earnestness on the subject; something that suggested things wouldn't be good. The two may not know the details; but they could feel it. If Lorelei wasn't freed, neither would the world, and the two would disappear together.

They had to find Asch and Luke... and those two idiots had better be alright.

"You're right," Guy finally said, offering Tear a grateful smile.

"Shall we press on?" Jade asked.

"Yes," Guy agreed. "Let's go get them back."

Luke stood tense, staring down the Oracle Knights that had surrounded them. He could feel Asch pressed up against his back, the tension flowing between them through that physical connection, hyper vigilance coming across their mental one. Each soldier held a blade, though they varied in size and state of disrepair, each was a threat. Luke made quick note of his opponents' weapon selection and if nothing else was grateful he didn't see bows or spears in the mix. This was going to be a rough fight as it was.

'Well?' Luke was the first to speak.

'I think I have a plan,' Asch replied, his eyes still darting across his opponents in case they decided to attack before he'd drawn his sword.

'And what's that?'
'We need to take these guys out before we can escape,' Asch explained. 'Otherwise they'll follow us back to the others.'

'Alright. Get rid of these guys. Escape. Sounds good. How are we going to do that?'

'No matter what I do, just go with it, okay?'

'What?' Luke demanded confusedly, resisting the urge to spin around, just to try and read his sibling's face.

'Got it?' Asch replied forcefully.

'Got it,' Luke conceded. 'Just don't do anything stupid.'

Luke suddenly felt a strange weight on his sword as Asch shifted positions and it took him a moment to realize Asch had reached back and pulled Luke's own sword from its sheath. This time Luke did spin around and when he did he found the Sword of Lorelei thrust into his hands. Before he could even formulate a thought, much less any kind of protest or demand for an explanation, Asch was charging the ring of soldiers and chaos erupted.

Luke pulled the Sword of Lorelei from its sheath and followed Asch's lead, plunging the blade through a weak joint in the soldier's armour and spilling his blood on the floor. Luke watched the man fall for a brief second, mourning the loss of life, replica or not, but quickly raised his sword to block the next strike. He would build a world worthy of all the lives he'd taken. That would be his tribute to the fallen.

Though Luke had never fought with the Sword of Lorelei before, the sword had a weight and balance that made it feel as if it had been forged just for him. It moved like an extension of himself, from one strike to the next, responding exactly as he wanted it to with effortless ease. Next to him Asch fought with equal skill and Luke suspected they could thank their switching game that Asch was so accustomed to fighting with Luke's blade that he wasn't put off in the least.

'What the hell are you thinking?' Luke finally demanded, ducking under another soldier's strike and cutting him down.

'No matter what happens the Sword and Jewel need to get out of here' Asch replied, blocking the attack from another Oracle Knight. 'Lorelei has to freed!'

'Oh now don't you start giving me that crap,' Luke shot, serious, but with a playful edge.

'Yeah, yeah,' Asch replied and while Luke couldn't see his sibling's face, he knew that Asch was grinning.

'We take out the soldiers, we escape.' Luke reminded Asch. 'Simple.'

'You know as well as I do it's never that simple.'

'Don't look at me, it was your plan.'

'Fine,' Asch conceded, catching Luke's gaze for a moment, a light dancing in his eyes. 'Then let's put an end to this once and for all!'

A wave of energy rolled off Asch, forcing several of the soldiers back, if only for a brief second, before they renewed their assault. Luke could see the focus on his sibling's face, the calm despite the attacks he was under and he knew better than anyone that he didn't want to be anywhere near
Asch in the next ten seconds. Thankfully their opponents didn't seem to notice, instead taking advantage of the easier target. Luke crippled his last opponent, all the remaining knights converging on Asch. The entire ground lit up, glyphs carving themselves around his sibling in the blink of an eye. The fonons throughout the room shimmered and Asch plunged Luke's sword into the ground.

Luke had never actually seen Asch's Rending Sabre before; which was completely understandable seeing as it consumed an abhorred amount of energy. He did remember the day Asch had finally mastered it, and just how excited he had been. Luke had been so jealous at the time, but even so, he couldn't help but get caught up in Asch's enthusiasm. It was one of the few times Luke could remember when Asch was truly happy. Not bogged down by responsibilities and obligations. Not carrying around Luke's fate, as well as his own, and with them all their grim implications. Asch had been so happy, and in that moment, so free.

The last handful of soldiers all collapsed, their armour all crashing in unison as the arte blasted them from beneath, leaving a collection of bodies and blood strewn across the once pristine marble floor. Luke surveyed the damage for a second before collecting Asch's sheath that he had tossed aside in the heat of the moment. He placed the sword back in its slot, hiding the glow of the blade that called out to the Jewel dormant within him.

"There," Asch said aloud, still gathering himself from the exertion of his last attack. "See, simple," he added teasingly.

"Yeah well, what was with this?" Luke asked holding up Asch's blade. Asch shrugged, offering no explanation. "Well here." Luke held out the sword.

Asch reached to take the blade but was interrupted by the familiar grinding of the door as it opened once again.

"You better hang onto that," Asch replied. "Looks like we aren't out of the woods just yet."

"Am I the only one who finds it odd that we haven't come across a single person yet?" Anise asked out loud as they walked down yet another white marble hallway. Surprise, freaking, surprise. This whole damn place looked like a river of white paint had thrown up on it. Anise was starting to think she'd be grateful to see any other colour, and that was including the green of Sync's hair, but no. Not even the God-general was anywhere to be seen. Other than the odd bird monster the place was freakishly quiet.

"It is unusual," Natalia agreed. "Even given the size of the island, you would think we'd have at least encountered some of the guards. It's highly doubtful that they remained ignorant of our arrival, one would think they'd be searching for us."

"Perhaps we're in a low security area," Tear suggested. "If there's little of value in this area, my brother wouldn't waste the troops to defend it. It's a large island; I'm sure security in all the areas would be a challenge."

"Unfortunately that would also mean we are in the entirely wrong place to be searching for the twins," Jade stated. "As we've already established their importance to Van, it's unlikely we'll be finding their location unguarded."

"Or it could means all the guards are being summoned elsewhere," Guy pointed out. "Like where Luke and Asch are."
"I don't like the implications of either option," Natalia stated.

"For now we'd best count our blessings that we've encountered such little resistance," Jade pointed out.

"And pray to Yulia it continues," Tear added.


Luke could once again feel the pressure of his sibling's back against his own. He could sense its rise and fall in time with his own as they both fought to catch their breath. Already the muscles in his arms and legs ached, screaming in protest from the battles he'd been fighting, but with no visible end in sight, he had no choice but to continue ignoring them.

'Back to square one, huh?' Asch commented trying to make light of the situation though he was as tired as his sibling.

'Yeah, except I still have your sword.'

'Details.'

Luke could have almost laughed if it wouldn't have triggered the next wave of battle. For every round of soldiers they defeated, another dozen or so came through that stupid door. They'd debated trying to escape when it opened, but there was no saying how many Oracle Knights waited for them on the other side. The way things were going it was starting to look like an inexhaustible army of replica soldiers just sat behind the door waiting for their turn to try and claim Master Van's treasured prize. Regardless; there wasn't an end in sight and with each ensuing wave they were being worn down. If this kept up it would only be a matter of time.

'We can't keep this up,' Luke pointed out the obvious, still staring down his opponents. Each set of soldiers always played out the same routine: they would rush into the room, surround him and Asch, and wait. They would never attack first, responding only if they were attacked. What they were waiting for, Luke couldn't figure out, but he doubted it was anything short of surrender.

'Yeah but what can we do?' Asch asked.

'There has to be some way to escape,' Luke replied. 'We just need to figure it out.'

'Well I came up with the last plan, this time it's your turn.'

'Last I checked we're still in the middle of your plan,' Luke shot back. 'What we really need is some way to get that other door open. You've got a better view than I do. See anything?'

Asch only dared to take his eyes off his opponents for a short second but with each glance behind the enemy line he scanned the upper door. It wasn't decorative, which meant there had to be some way to open it. With no handles of any descript and given the sheer force it would take to open, there had to be some kind of mechanism involved... but what?

'There!' Asch suddenly called out, startling Luke with the sheer intensity of his discovery. 'There's some kind of panel on the wall; I think I can use it to open the door, but we're going to need some time.'

'Time, huh?' Luke glanced behind him at the rising staircase and the statues that overlooked it. A light lit in his eyes. Asch noticed this, following Luke's gaze to the statues' narrow bases. 'Are you
thinking what I'm thinking?" A grin spread across Asch's face and he subtly nodded.

Asch charged forward, beginning the fight as they always did, and just as the replicas before them had, the Oracle Knights all converged on their target. Breaking the cycle, Luke didn't attack his half of the knights, instead running toe in toe with Asch. Both their blades collided with a single defender and the soldier was toppled. Asch didn't waste a second landing the killing blow, Luke spinning around to deflect the two incoming attacks on either side of Asch. Both attackers stumbled back; they found their opening.

Still running at full speed, the twins broke away from the circle. Behind them they heard the familiar clinking of their foes' armour. They had the lead by a second when they reached the staircase; it would be all they needed. Flying up the steps, Luke and Asch simultaneously spun around, arm outstretched the same incantation flew to their lips and echoed across the room in the same voice.

"Oh maddening gale of the spirits of the earth!"

Twin stone pillars erupted from the earth, crumbling the marble floor like it was nothing. The soldiers screeched to a halt, colliding with each other as they instinctively fought to evade even though neither attack threatened the forces. The Oracle Knights looked about confusedly, unsure what to make of such an obvious miss. The twins watched the chaos with an evil smirk on their faces, their red hair still settling about them; they had both hit their mark.

A deafening crack sounded throughout the chamber as the statues' bases simultaneously shattered. The several story tall structures trembled for a moment, then slipped from their perches, crashing down across the stairs between the redheads and their assailants sending clouds of dust and rubble into the air. Luke and Asch held still for a moment more, only enough time to see their barricade in place before rushing up the remaining stairs.

"That's not going to hold them long," Luke commented from the top. Below he could see the knights organizing themselves, trying to find a way over the massive boulders that now blocked their path. Across the room more soldiers were streaming in to help, bringing tools to expedite the process.

"Hopefully it'll be just long enough," Asch retorted, rushing over to the panel. What Asch thought might be some kind of mechanism seemed instead to only be a carving in the wall, but the glyphs involved seemed vaguely familiar. Asch placed his hand on the glyph and instantly recognized what he was dealing with. "It's just like the passage rings."

"What do you mean?"

"What else?" Asch asked with a shrug and a grin. Luke sensed Seventh Fonons converging on the panel and with a massive rumble, the huge marble doors crept open.

"Alright, Asch!" Luke cheered, watching the doors slowly slide open. "Let's hurry up and catch the others before it's too late!"

"No," Asch answered simply.

"What? Why not?"

"You have to go; I'm going to stay here."

"Like hell you are!" Luke yelled. "I am not leaving you behind! We can both escape! And don't give me some half-assed excuse like 'if you let go the door will close'. The damn thing took a full
"Minute to open; we both have time to get out."

"No, you're right, we both could escape, but you know as well as I do why we can't both go. You said it yourself, that barricade down there won't last long, and as soon as they're through it, the first place they're coming is after us. We won't be able to beat Van if we have to take out his replica army first, even if it's all seven of us fighting."

"So what are you trying to suggest? You can't take them all on by yourself!"

"I don't have to eliminate them all, I just need to make sure they stay busy while you guys deal with Van. I'll destroy the panel once you're gone so they can't follow, and I'll pretend to have the Jewel so I draw most of their reinforcements here instead of on a search for you."


"Luke, we don't have a choice!"

"But you won't have any way of escaping! How can you possibly think you can pull this off? This is too much, even for you!"

"Hey, there's another door right? I'll figure something out. I've always been better at coming up with plans on the spot than you have anyway," Asch added teasingly.

The sound of shifting rocks drew the twins' attention. The soldiers were getting close to surmounting the make-shift barricade. Damn, they were faster than Asch had anticipated.

"We're out of time Luke," Asch said solemnly, and with a small blast, his arte obliterated the markings on the wall and with a shudder, the huge marble doors began to slowly creep shut.

"Why?" Luke demanded, his voice quivering. "Why does it have to be you?"

"It's not me Luke," Asch replied softly. "It's you. It's always been you. You're the one meant for all this. You're the one who needs to stop Van; you're the one who needs to free Lorelei... all this has always been your destiny, Luke, not mine."

"But..."

"You were born to give this world a future that I- no- that no one else can give it. I truly believe that's why I was lucky enough to have you in my life, so I could watch you build that future. That's why you're the one who needs to go now."


"I'm your big brother, it's my job," Asch answered with a smile. "It always has been, always will be. Remember I told you that we each have our place? Well, my place is right here protecting you so you can go out and create that new world. Please let me do this, for you and for our friends."

"I can't," Luke pleaded weakly. "I can't just leave you here."

"We might not always be side by side, but no matter where you go you won't be alone," Asch reminded Luke, his words from Chesedonia stinging painfully as the reality of their meaning set in. "I'll always be there with you. Luke, you have to go, the doors are going to close."

"Fine," Luke conceded. "Just... Just promise me something."

"What's that?"
"Promise that no matter what you do, no matter what happens, you'll do whatever it takes to win. Promise me that I will see you again!" Asch stepped up to his brother, placing his hands on Luke's shoulders and looking him straight in the eye.

"I promise you, Luke."

"Thank you," Luke replied, breaking Asch's gaze, but letting a smile escape to his lips.

"You're out of time, Luke," Asch spoke up, still holding Luke's shoulders. His eyes turned to the marble doors, only a few feet opening left between them. "The doors are almost closed, you need to go now!"

"Asch?"

"What?" Asch asked hastily.

"I'm sorry."

In the sudden flurry of movement, Asch was thrown backwards, the shadow of the door frame passing over him as he reeled under the unexpected force and weight that was thrust at him. Asch scrambled to catch his balance, rushing to catch up with the chain of events that had just been set into motion. Barely catching himself before falling, any thoughts he might have had were drowned by the immense clack of the marble doors slamming shut for the last time.

In that moment, Asch's world stopped turning.

That final thud echoed in the empty hall, ringing in his ears, but unable to penetrate his shell-shocked mind. Alone in the now deafening silence, everything Asch knew, everything Asch thought he believed came crashing down around him. The impossibility of what was happening locked up his every thought, his every feeling, leaving his shell to stare blankly at the now impassable barrier that loomed over him. The same massive doors that had been his hope for Luke now sealed behind them everything he had ever treasured.

In his trembling arms, Asch found the Jewel and Sword of Lorelei, around which dangled Luke's half of their mother's locket.
Promise

Asch stood alone in the deserted hallway, staring at those towering marble doors for what seemed like an eternity. It might have been longer; he didn't know. Time was a concept beyond his understanding, too complex and irrelevant for his stunned mind to process. Only the echo of the doors shutting repeated over and over in his mind. Luke's voice, his promise... his quiet apology as Asch's world spiralled out of control... it all combined itself into a single existence that he couldn't, no, that Asch refused to grasp. So instead he stood there in disbelief as seconds like hours fell from time which he no longer recognized.

The soft chime of metal striking marble brought Asch back to reality. Searching the ground, a golden glimmer stood out against the white floor as the source. It was a locket... Picking it up and flipping it over he saw his younger self staring back at him. For a brief moment his eyes lost themselves in the picture, tracing each line until they ran off the edge, severing the connection with the one who had shared that moment with him. Cutting him from...


As soon as the first piece of reality slipped through, everything followed suit and Asch found himself under siege as every thought and feeling he could possibly imagine flooded him at once. The fight, the door, the words, the promise- He could already see it: Luke, the soldiers, swords clashing, metal ringing, the attacks, the chaos- Luke beaten and bloody and alone without anyone to hold him or protect him. Luke lying in a pool of his own life, swords still scattered about, some around him, others within him. Abandoned and forsaken in an empty hall with nothing but death to accompany him as he waited for the end- No! Asch refused to allow it! He wouldn't- He wouldn't let this happen! This wasn't how things were going to be!

The Sword and Jewel of Lorelei clattered in unison as they were discarded; with nothing but Luke's locket clutched in his fist, Asch frantically struck the marble doors. The fire that raced up his arms did little to convince him of the futility of his gesture. He began to pound harder, with little reward save for the intensifying pain. It was supposed to be him in there! This was his gamble, his sacrifice, not Luke's! He wouldn't let Luke take his place!

"Damn it all, open!" Asch hollered at the marble barrier. "Let me in! He's not supposed to be in there! Open!"

'Now you're being a hypocrite,' Luke's voice rang playfully across their connection. 'You seemed perfectly fine leaving me in your position right now.'

'Luke this isn't... this isn't a game.' Whatever energy Asch had conjured dissipated leaving the redhead to slide down to his knees in defeat, his raw hands giving the door one final blow. 'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

'Good,' Luke stated. 'I was wondering when you were going to stop that. You'll need your strength against Master Van. Isn't that what you told me?'

'Don't change the subject!' Asch protested. 'It wasn't your place to do that! It wasn't your choice to make! It was mine! Now you're stuck and you don't even have a weapon!'

'There are plenty of swords lying around here; I'll just take one of them. Besides, I've still got a few tricks up my sleeve,' Luke replied, ignoring Asch's accusations. Across their connection, Asch stole a glimpse through Luke's eyes. The swarm of Oracle Knights had cleared an opening in the rubble.
Now they were making quick work of widening the gap so they could pass. There were easily two or three squadrons of them... and only one of Luke. Asch felt his heart sink even further. This was his worst nightmare coming true before his eyes. Luke couldn't do it... not alone.

No, that was a lie and Asch knew it. If anything, Luke probably stood more of a chance in there than he would have. Asch just couldn't bring himself to accept it. Accept that Luke had grown stronger than he had, accept that Luke didn't need Asch to look out for him anymore... To Asch, Luke was still that little boy, that poor defenceless replica that needed to be protected. For eight years Asch had been determined to protect Luke. Whether it be from the dangers of the world or the darkness of the human heart, he wanted to shield Luke from everything. He was Luke's big brother; if it was Luke's role to light up his world, then he would protect that light with everything he had! It was too instinctive, too much a part of who he had become. Luke was strong, he had grown up and was able to make his own choices, and Asch knew that; but it would always be his job to look out for Luke and to stand by his side, no matter what those choices were.

'Why...' Asch demanded, choking out the words in defeat. His fists tightened until the frustration turned them white. 'Why couldn't you let me do this? Why did you take my place?'

'All my life, you've always been the one to watch out for me. Even when I didn't know it, you were protecting me and taking care of me. This time, it's my turn to protect you.'

'No, I won't do it. I'm not letting this happen!'

'You promised.'

'I never agreed to this!'

'You promised me you would do whatever it took to win. No matter what!'

Asch froze, the words whispering across his ears.

_Promise that no matter what you do, no matter what happens, you'll do whatever it takes to win._

_No matter what._

'No! That's not what I meant! That's not what I agreed to! I won't just leave-'

'You promised!' Luke cut him off sharply, letting the silence reinforce that he would not let him back down. Every second unloaded its weight onto Asch until the older sibling fought to catch his breath. No matter how hard he protested, no matter how much he struggled... it was no different than his pounding on the marble doors: he could fight and fight and fight but nothing was going to change the situation they were in. Asch fought the inevitability with every fibre of his being, but the ice cold clutch on his throat only held him tighter. No! He wasn't going to allow this to-

Asch's thought came to a screeching halt, a single pained laugh escaping his lungs. He was so completely hopeless! How many times had he told himself that he wouldn't go back to the person he had once been? How many times had he sworn he would stand on his own two feet and walk forward? Luke had chosen to stay behind in that accursed room, for the same reasons Asch himself wanted to do the same. He knew all too well the desire to protect the people he cared for, the willingness to do anything so long as they would be safe... so much so that it had made Luke's decision impossible to accept. He was so hard-wired, so focused on protecting Luke that he hadn't realized somewhere along the way, Luke had wanted to protect him as well; that all his feelings, all his hopes and dreams for his sibling were being reciprocated.

Asch had feared Luke growing up more than anything; had feared the day he wouldn't be needed
anymore. The day Luke could stand on his own, he'd walk ahead, leaving Asch behind in a past he would never escape; but Asch had been wrong. Now it was time for him to grow too, it was time for Asch to show Luke he was just as strong... that he could move forward on his own too, and if he spent his whole life trying, he would catch up to Luke who stood dazzling in the sun.

Things were not going to end like this; Asch would die before he let that happen. He would finish his fight, and he would be back for his little brother. Nothing, not Lorelei and certainly not Van, was going to stop him.

So no matter how his heart screamed in desperation, he would keep moving forward, and he believed... no, he knew that their paths would cross again.

'A promise goes both ways,' Asch finally answered, pulling himself to his feet. 'We promised we would meet again. Hold up your end of that promise, and I'll keep mine.'

'When have I ever broken a promise to you?' Luke asked, his tone regaining its playful edge. 'I'll be fine, so get the hell out of here and go find the others.'

Asch began to reply but found their connection closed. He vaguely sensed a burst of energy and Asch deduced that the enemy had finally broken through. Luke's battle had begun. With a deep breath, Asch turned his back on the marble doors and ripped his heart from where it still clung desperately to the thought of bursting in and rescuing his little brother. Luke was right, he had promised. This was Luke's battle, not his.

Still... turning away from that door was the hardest thing Asch had ever done.

The Sword and Jewel still sat on the floor where Asch had dropped them and the young monarch quietly retrieved the set. He spent a moment scrutinizing the Jewel; it was the first time he'd the chance to handle it. It was pretty, he'd give it that; the cloudy wisps inside swirled all the more intensely when he picked it up and Asch wondered if it could read his state of mind. That might be the case, but the longer he looked at the Jewel, the more he realized it would not divulge any of its secrets so easily. It was clear where the Jewel should lay in the Sword, and it was just as clear that there was no way such a large stone would fit, much less remain in the Sword's hilt. It was a problem Asch wasn't expecting to have to solve.

For the time being, Asch slipped the Jewel into his pack along with the few healing supplies he carried with him. He opened his palm to drop Luke's locket in alongside it, but hesitated. Instead he reached into his own pocket and pulled out a matching locket. With a quick gesture, he tied the pair around his neck, reuniting the set that hadn't been together in years.

He would keep his promise to Luke, no matter what it took... no matter who or what he had to destroy to get there; he wasn't going to fail his little brother. He'd done enough of that over the years; failed when he should have stepped up, disappeared when he was needed most, but not this time. He would win... and he would meet Luke again.

No matter what.

Still, he couldn't shake the image of Luke taking on all those soldiers alone... or the sense of foreboding curdling the pit of his stomach.

No matter what... we'll meet again.

You promised.
Guy looked over his shoulder at the endless walkway that stretched out behind them. It had taken long enough to find this route. By all right and purposes he should be glad they'd finally found a way to reach the island's interior, but each step he took was another stab of betrayal. Every step was one step further away from wherever Luke and Asch were, one step away from where they might be desperately trying to survive Van's onslaught, one step away from where Guy might be needed most, and Guy was loathing every second of it.

"Why aren't we still looking for Luke and Asch?" Guy demanded. "They could be in trouble for all we know!"

"Those two remain perpetually in trouble," Jade commented. "The day they are not shall be cause for concern." The Colonel's humour was not appreciated by the blond, evident by his darkening scowl.

"Guy, we've been over this!" Anise answered in desperation, surprised the Colonel's patience was still intact enough to joke about it. She was ready to knock Guy right off the damn bridge at this rate. "It would take us weeks to search the entire place!"

"From what we've seen thus far, Eldrant's infrastructure is rather extensive. 'Weeks' is a generous estimate and regardless of the precise timeframe, it is time that we can no longer afford to spend," Jade added, conspicuously adjusting his glasses. "The boys knew in which direction we were headed, and Asch, at least, has enough of a head on his shoulders to go in the same direction if-

"If they're still alive," Guy finished bitterly. "What are we supposed to do if we don't find them? How do we fix all this without them, or without the Key of Lorelei for that matter?"

"Oh for crying out loud!" Anise snapped. "Would you stop that? Can't you see we're all worried sick too?"

It only took a quick glance at his friends for Guy to realize how true Anise's statement was. Neither Natalia nor Tear had said a word in hours and though both were putting up a strong front, the concern shone in their eyes. His outburst may not have broken their silence, but Guy could see them both shift uncomfortably at his words. Natalia grasped a handkerchief so tightly in her hands Guy was surprised the small piece of fabric was still intact.

"None of us like it, but what else do you want us to do?" Anise continued. "We can't spend all our time searching an area twice the size of Baticul; by then Van will have half the continent devoured! Even if we can't free Lorelei without Luke and Asch, we need to at least put a stop to the fomicry facilities."

"You're right," Guy answered. "I'm sorry; I know those two can take care of themselves... I just can't help but worry about them."

"We know," Natalia managed, temporarily taming the uncertainty in her voice. "But it is in times like these that we need to believe in them more than ever. I'm certain they will pull through and will meet up with us."

"We'll cross paths soon," Tear said, though she lacked her usual confidence. She was trying earnestly to believe in the words that she spoke. "There aren't many paths leading to the interior; I'm sure they'll be right behind us in no time."

"Precisely," Natalia agreed, placing a hand on the melodist's shoulder. Tear smiled gratefully. "I'm certain this isn't the only path to the interior either, there's a good chance we may meet up with them as we approach our goal."
Guy couldn't bring himself to look either of the girls in the eye, instead walking along with his gaze fixed on the ground. Anise was right: everyone was worried... then he had to go open his big mouth and make everything worse. Of course Luke and Asch would be okay... they always were; no matter what kind of crazy trouble they got into, they always managed to get out of it somehow. He didn't mean to put everyone even more on edge; he just couldn't stand the tension!

Watching the ground turned out to be, if possible, even more unsettling than facing the girls. The whole of Eldrant seemed to open up below the narrow bridge they walked. The heights were dizzying, even for the blond who'd spent most of his life in Baticul. From here it was easy to see why Jade had called off the search for the boys when they'd come across this bridge. There were easily several dozen stories below, and the island wasn't exactly a small place. All Guy knew was that Luke and Asch had disappeared somewhere below them; even if by some stroke of luck he found the room the pair had been dumped in, the chances that the two would still be there were slim. Jade was right; Asch and Luke knew the interior was their goal, that's where they would try to reach. They knew better than to stay put and turn themselves into one big target. The Sword and Jewel they carried did that well enough as it was. Still... it left a bad taste in his mouth.

Guy finally had to look up before his head started spinning and when he did he found Natalia glancing back at him. He sheepishly rubbed the back of his head, offering an apologetic smile. She nodded, understanding that he'd meant no harm and sharing in his concern for the boys. It was bad enough to think that they might lose the boys regardless of the current circumstances, to worry about them being killed was more than either cared to handle. Surely everyone would be heading home together once all was said and done... wouldn't they?

Words remained conspicuously absent for the remainder of the bridge, and even afterward, Guy merely muttered what was needed to point them in the proper direction. In any other instance Jade would have been fascinated by the study of his companions' character, but he found he simply wasn't interested; far too many pressing matters demanded his attention.

While Guy's small outburst was rather childish, he did raise one very valid point: how were they to solve the matter at hand without the Sword and Jewel? Asch had been quite correct in Chesedonia; Jade hadn't been accounting for the possibility of the boys' absence. In all the scenarios he'd envisioned, they were always present. A foolish oversight really; what in Auldrant had possessed him these past few months the Colonel would never know. If faith was the foolish notion he'd always deemed it to be, then he was the biggest fool of them all.

Just what would they do if they never found the twins? Or worse yet; if Dorian General Grants found them first?

It wasn't long before the endless bridges gave way to clusters of buildings, their white marble heights climbing to the sky and dwarfing the princess who walked in their shadows. The cobblestone streets were, if possible even narrower than the paths they'd been previously walking and even Guy was struggling to keep his bearings through the stone labyrinth. Perhaps it was pointless to say everyone was on edge; they'd been apprehensive since losing Luke and Asch, but that anxiety continued to increase the longer they wandered between buildings. None of them fancied encountering an enemy here.

It was the faintest whisper of movement between two buildings ahead that caught her eye; a splotch of colour against the endless white. Natalia froze in her steps, her first instinct placing her hand on her bow and another on the feather of an arrow. Her bowstring taut, she waited a moment, patiently waiting for the enemy to reveal themselves. Her swift motion had caught the attention of her companions, who all watched the adjacent street as carefully as she. The alley gave Natalia a
narrow-view of the road her target walked, but it also hid her and her companions from sight. If nothing else, she'd the element of surprise. The sound of footsteps erupted in the silence and Natalia flew around, but something made her hesitate. Then a glimpse of red dropped her every defence.

"Asch!" Natalia called out, eagerly running forward with her companions in tow.

"Natalia!" The redhead turned at the sound of Natalia's voice, surprise giving way to relief; clearly he hadn't dared hope to cross paths with them so soon. Or perhaps he'd feared it, Jade pondered, watching the redhead try to hide a multitude of emotions behind his forced smile. It didn't take a genius to figure out what secrets hid behind such a hesitant expression; no one failed to notice that he was alone.

"Where's Luke?" Guy asked, barely greeting Asch, his blue eyes already scanning the area in search of a matching head of red hair. Coming up short, he returned his attention to Asch, only to have him avert his gaze. Guy's heart instantly sank.


"What do you mean he's not here?" The blond demanded. "What happened to him? The two of you disappeared together! Where is he now?"

"He stayed behind to hold off Van's forces so the rest of us could go on ahead."

"What?" Tear's voice came out barely louder than a whisper as the air fled her lungs. The melodist felt her heart seize; Luke alone... taking on her brother's army... No, it just wasn't possible. This was another one of their jokes, Luke would be turning the corner in just a second wearing that big grin of his and they'd all laugh about it...

"You idiot!" Guy yelled, snapping Tear from her thoughts. "How could you let him do that?"

"You think this is what I wanted?" Asch retaliated with such intensity the blond stepped backwards. "Do you think for a second that I let him stay behind?"

Asch's body shook, fighting to maintain control over the storm of emotions that had just erupted. His fists were whiter than the marble wall he pounded them against. The sound echoed in the empty street but did little to ease the redhead's overwhelming frustration.

"What happened?" Tear asked, her voice still quiet, fearing the answer to the question she posed.

"Luke and I were trapped in a room full of Oracle Knights," Asch began. "We got the door open and I told him to go on ahead... but that idiot forced me out instead. I was the one supposed to stay behind, not him!" Asch pounded the marble wall with his fist again.

"That's so like him," Anise said breaking the silence. "He's always worrying about everyone but himself."

"That's true," Tear agreed, trying to smile in spite of her overwhelming concern.

"Try not to worry for him too much," Natalia offered gently. "He's grown much stronger than he was when we began all this."

"Natalia's right," Guy spoke up, trying to make up for his thoughtless outbursts before. "He can
definitely hold his own, and without a doubt he will come back to us."

"Yes," Tear stated, standing up straight and giving Natalia a grateful smile. Her friends were right; she had to believe in his strength, and that he would come back to her. Because if she didn't believe in him, who would?

"We ought to keep moving," Jade pointed out. "Lest the soldiers catch up with us and Luke's efforts be in vain."

"Let's go," Asch agreed, his tone betraying that he'd yet to completely regain command of his emotions.

Asch started forward, not knowing where he was headed, or even if the others were following. He just put one foot in front of the other, not daring to look over his shoulder. The others would follow; he knew they would and he trusted that they'd stop him if he were headed in the wrong direction. He just... he couldn't look back. To look back was to give in, and if he did every shred of willpower he'd mustered would shatter and he would find himself back at that cursed room, frantically trying to find a way in. He refused to insult Luke that way, and so he just continued to walk forward. One step at a time, just as he'd once told Luke... just do what you can do. One step... then another, it was his turn to move forward, his turn to grow; it was his turn to show Luke that he too could stand on his own two feet.

The echo of footsteps told Asch his companions weren't far, yet they all continued in silence, which was just as well. Any conversation would just be a reminder of their feeble attempts to avert their thoughts from Luke's decision. It was pointless; Luke was such a crucial part of who they all were that his absence reverberated within them, resounding in a hole that just couldn't be filled, least of all by petty conversation. To ignore it was impossible; to pretend all was well felt like a kick in the chest. Each empty building they passed was a reminder; each vacant street spoke of the battle Luke was waging alone... Asch quickened his pace, the rhythm of footsteps accelerated. He had his own battle to face... and the sooner he finished, the sooner he would be back for his little brother.

Jade sighed and adjusted his glasses. It wasn't that he minded the quickened pace that Asch adopted. As a matter of fact, their smooth progression was more than welcome at this point. He supposed they had their youngest comrade to thank for that. It certainly explained the lack of guards about, though it remained a mystery as to why no alarm had been raised. Luke must be drawing their forces somehow, and if that were the case than the best way to return the favour would be to find Van as quickly as possible.

The change in scenery was welcome and from the endless sea of white marble emerged an open field of green. The vegetation that had been completely absent until this point now painted the fields and roads a myriad of colours, leaving Jade to ponder the sudden change. The island's unusually barren outskirts suddenly made a great deal more sense.

"We're heading the right way," Jade affirmed out loud.

"What makes you say that?" Anise asked.

"The plants can't be replicated as quickly as the island's infrastructure," the Colonel replied. "The replication of living things is more complex and time consuming than that of inanimate ones. Considering both would have a similar point of origin, we can safely assume that we are approaching the fomicry facilities."

"They must be at the center of the island," Guy replied, surveying his surroundings. The grass
broke up the ruins of buildings and statues that were scattered about, making them easier to identify. "Things here look a lot more familiar, we can't be too far now."

"Good news, wouldn't you say so, Asch?" Jade inquired slyly. As expected, he got no response from the redhead who had long since tuned out the world around him.

"Really now," Jade continued, placing a hand on the young monarch's shoulder. A satisfied grin crossed his face when Asch tensed, the contact startling him.

"What do you want, old man?" Asch growled, angry at being caught off guard.

"How is Luke?"

"He's holding his own for-" Asch bit his lip and glowered that he'd fallen for the Colonel's trap. Of all the dirty... Asch grumbled inaudibly, trudging forward in attempts to escape the Colonel that easily matched his pace. It wasn't long before they'd gained some distance from the others.

"I know you're concerned for the wellbeing of your sibling, but do try to let up a bit," Jade stated once they were out of earshot. "Your constant distractedness is doing you both a disservice. It wouldn't do to have you fall into a trap because of your inattentiveness, now would it?"

"What do you know?" Asch grumbled.

"I know that if it were Luke in your position, he would have the utmost faith in your abilities and would trust you to look out for yourself without having to check in every ten seconds. Have some faith in your brother as he always has in you."

Asch muttered something under his breath that even the Colonel's acute hearing couldn't quite pick up. He was displeased, but still considering the point made. "I guess you're right," the redhead finally conceded. "I know he'll be okay... but that doesn't make it any easier to swallow. It doesn't make it okay that he's stuck with who knows how many soldiers hell bent on kill him!"

"It's not your fault he's in there, you know." Asch's eyes flew up to meet Jade's unwavering gaze. How easily these children seemed to forget how readable they were. "Luke chose to stay there so he could protect you, so he could protect all of us. Those feelings are his alone; to blame yourself is to ignore those sentiments completely."

"Why do you always have to be right?" Asch demanded.

"It's an unfortunate habit of mine, I'm afraid," Jade replied, pushing his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. When he got no reply, Jade returned his gaze to the redhead and found his attention elsewhere.

"You're doing it again," Jade taunted.

This time Asch scoffed but a faint grin lit his face. "What can I say? Old habits die hard."

Jade replied, but whatever he said was lost on the young monarch. Asch couldn't say he particularly cared either. He knew deep down that Jade was right, the bastard always was, but he just couldn't shake the sickening feeling that something was wrong. Then he'd found their connection open again; Luke was far too pre-occupied with his fight to keep it closed and so Asch watched on as soldier after soldier fell to Luke's blade.

Asch trusted Luke; it wasn't that he doubted his little brother's skills, or even that he believed Luke couldn't overcome this. He did; he had complete and utter faith in his sibling... that was why Asch
himself couldn't explain what it was that inexorably drew him in. Some unseen force constantly pulled at him and every second he forced himself to close their connection was spent thinking about how long before he could dare to open it again. He simply couldn't turn his attention from Luke, who, in spite of his growing weariness, was still holding his own against the hoard of soldiers surrounding him.

Worse than his inability to avert his attention from Luke's dilemma, however, was that to his sibling, Asch was a distraction. He was doing nothing to help and he wouldn't discredit Luke so much as to pretend he hadn't noticed Asch's presence every few minutes. By all rights Asch should just bury the pit in his stomach, dismiss his inexplicable unease and leave Luke to his battle. He was just being a bother! Worse, distracting Luke right now was going to get his sibling killed! He just needed to let it go! Asch was about to retreat completely when he felt Luke smile. Though Luke offered no words, not daring to falter, the gratitude for Asch's sentiments came across none the less. Asch returned the mental smile and continued to observe.

The marble step came as a surprise to Asch, who had become so completely engrossed in Luke's world that he'd forgotten he was still walking alongside his friends. Jade firmly grasped the redhead's arm and spared him the tumble he'd have otherwise taken. Asch earned himself a harsh glare from the Colonel but behind his eyes danced a light that told him exactly what Jade no longer had to say. *I told you so.*

Asch didn't even bother to see what kind of reaction his fumble had earned him from the others. Given the circumstances, such a thing didn't even register as relevant. His only annoyance was at the realization he couldn't watch Luke and climb the stairs at the same time, leaving Asch to begrudgingly close off their connection.

Though they were barely a story tall, the staircase seemed to extend upwards forever. Asch just wanted to get to the top so he could check and see how Luke was doing. Taking a closer look at his surroundings, Asch could see that they'd progressed a ways inwards. While at first the interior had only grasses and wildflowers, there were now trees among the shattered ruins that still lay about. Buildings with marble pillars stood to their sides, half hidden by the foliage that rose up around them. The wind rustled through the leaves and if not for the dire circumstances, Asch probably would have found the place peaceful.

Finally Asch could see the clearing at the top of the stairs; it looked to be a courtyard of sorts, leading up to an even larger building that could rival Daath's cathedral. This must be where they were headed; the place where Yulia was buried, and where Van had destroyed Hod. This was where the entire chain of events had begun, and it was where they were going to cut that chain once and for all.

The building's courtyard was nothing to scoff at either; a massive white slab cut through the green grass, covered with enough carvings to make Asch wonder if it hadn't once been a wall. He quickly dismissed the query as irrelevant. Beyond it lay more stairs leading to a second courtyard which eventually gave way to the final staircase climbing to the building itself. The quick survey was enough for the redhead who was more concerned with how much time he had before reaching the next set of stairs. There was enough time, he would just check on Luke quickly and that would be it.

Every time Asch had checked on Luke thus far, he had found the same thing; the same weary but confident aura permeated Luke's mind. A determination spawned from a will that was far stronger than the marble prison containing him. It was this raw will alone that had appeased Asch, that had reassured him nothing would happen. Nothing would go wrong so long as Luke held to the inner strength that this journey had bred in him; after all, Asch knew better than anyone when Luke set
his mind on something, there was no stopping him.

Yet when Asch opened their connection, he was flooded with a panic that set his own heart racing. His senses flared, fighting his way through the confusion and chaos in Luke's mind. What was happening? What was wrong?

Luke's surroundings hadn't changed; he still stood on the main platform, having pushed the Oracle Knights back through the barricade to give himself more room. There were only a handful of them left but everything was flying by so quickly Asch couldn't sort out what was going on. Luke's movements were an un-coordinated tumult and several more bodies crashed to the ground. Asch could feel his sibling focus on a retreating Knight.

'No, Luke don't! Don't be reckless!'

Luke took off after the soldier despite his brother's warning, his charge leaving him dangerously open. They'd come so far! He wasn't going to let it end here!

"It's a fake!" The soldier called out. "The Jewel he has is-"

Luke's sword pierced the man, and blood came pouring forth, further staining the blade already bathed in crimson. Luke paused to catch the breath that was so readily escaping him, his every limb felt heavy and sluggish but he willed them to respond. He wasn't done yet... there were still two soldiers left standing. He couldn't risk that they'd figured out his ruse too. He could rest when this was over. A flurry of movement came from the corner of his eye.

'Look out!' Asch's voice rang like a bell, snapping Luke from his daze. The younger redhead barely reacted in time, his sword meeting his opponent's just a hair before the blade came down, dancing inches away from his skull. The weight made Luke's arms tremble, but he wouldn't lose! He had sworn he would protect his friends. He made Asch promise they would see each other again! He-

Blood splattered across the uniform of the Oracle Knight he faced and for a split second Luke pondered its source. Looking down, Luke saw a red sheen glimmer off the sword protruding from his abdomen.

Asch's legs buckled out from under him.

A crippling agony shot through Luke, searing his every nerve until his entire body felt ablaze. The wave of nausea was the least of his concerns as a second wave of dizziness left Luke scrambling to keep his sword from faltering. It didn't take Asch's silent hysteria for him to know the severity of his wound; but Luke refused to give in now. Willing his eyes to focus, Luke called on every reserve of strength he possessed and slew the soldier in front of him. Not allowing himself to stop, Luke pushed forward with his momentum and swung around, the motion ripping the sword through his internal organs, leaving a deep gash that poured its contents onto the bloodstained floor. Thrown off balance by Luke's sudden movement, the last Oracle Knight barely had time to register the boy's attack before it collided with his helmet, effectively piercing his skull and striking him dead where he stood.

Now completely alone in the room, Luke stumbled back until he found the support of the wall behind him. He looked down at the offending blade still embedded in his gut, stemming some of the blood flow. Luke stared at the fatal injury long and hard, its consequences trying to work through the sudden haze in his mind. Adrenaline ebbed away, consumed by pain that overpowered his every sense, Unable to bear his weight, Luke collapsed to the ground, painting the wall red as he fell.
He had succeeded... he had protected everyone... for once... he had finally been able to protect Asch...

"Luke!"

Asch's voice pierced the fog in his mind, and Luke wondered vaguely why he sounded so upset. But he could ask Asch when he woke up. He was so tired...

"No! Luke! Don't you dare-! Yulia damn it all! Don't you give up like that!"

Asch hadn't even realized he'd spoken aloud. Around him he vaguely registered the panicked cries of his friends, who had all turned to him when he'd fallen to his knees, now demanding to know what was going on. Their voices couldn't penetrate the panic, the sheer and utter rejection of what he was witnessing. Right now his world only consisted of one thing, and if Luke vanished... if he actually- actually died... then the very foundations of everything Asch believed would be ripped out from under him. It just wasn't possible. Luke couldn't... Luke couldn't die! They'd finally figured each other out, they'd made amends, been able to see eye to eye. This wasn't going to end here! It couldn't! It just... it just...

"Come on Luke!" Asch screamed. "You have to pull through this! You can't die on me! Don't you dare die!"

Die? The thought crossed Luke's clouded mind. Who was going to die?

Don't die!

The cry shot through Luke's mind, clearing some of the fog. Glancing down, Luke noticed the sword still stained in his blood. He ran his hand across the blade; it shifted and agony flew up from his abdomen, clearing the last of the haze that lingered over him, leaving Luke to heave as he tried to endure it. That's right, he was the one dying... it was a pool of his own blood he sat in. The thought sent nausea crashing over him and whatever contents remained in his stomach were now strewn across the floor. Luke wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, pulling it back only to see it covered in the blood he'd just thrown up.

'Asch...' Luke managed weakly. 'I'm... sorry.'

Shock... fear... denial... anger... grief... In a heartbeat all these emotions erupted from Asch's mind, seeping through every muscle and joint until his entire body wilted. His lungs refused to function, his mind was an incoherent mess, and if there was still a heart that beat in his chest, it was lost to him. Nothing remained in its place but an inescapable void that tore through him until all he could do was scream incoherently into the silent air.

Asch's scream was laced with such powerful agony that Luke felt it like a second sword piercing his chest. Luke reeled from the squall of emotions it carried. The loneliness, the grief, the frustration... it was the cry of someone who'd lost everything. The cry of someone who'd rather die than face the insurmountable loss... then face the empty days ahead. Asch's scream died with his cracking voice, but the suffering that lingered in his mind was far from being so easily broken. Luke knew that pit... he knew the void that ate away at everything until it was the only thing left, searing a hole through the empty remains of your heart. He knew that pain... and that alone brought tears to his eyes.

Why...Why was he crying? Luke held a bloodstained hand to the water that trailed down his face, shaking with the effort such a simple gesture demanded. He'd been able to protect them, hadn't he? He had saved his friends, he had saved Asch... he'd done everything he wanted to do with the time
he had left... so why?

Yet, it wasn't just his pain he felt. Luke wasn't the one really suffering... he wasn't the one who would be left behind. Maybe... maybe that was the reason in and of itself. What bred these tears wasn't the sword that had pierced him, it wasn't the blood that ran in fiery pools across his skin. Luke wept for every ounce of the loneliness and sorrow Asch would feel, every bit of the ice that ripped through them and encased what shards of their heart dared to survive. He wept because in these last moments, their pain was one and the same.

'Asch...' Luke coughed, unleashing another surge of torment to course through his body. 'Could you tell Tear... I'm sorry?'

"No! No, I won't! Tell her your damn self!" Asch choked out. "We've come too far to end here! Not now! Not like this! I... I can't do this by myself!"

'You can.' Luke managed to smile weakly. 'You were always the strong one, remember?'

"That's bull! I've never been strong. I've never been as strong as you! You're always showing me up and proving you're the better person so you can't just give up now!" Asch pleaded. "Where's the Luke I look up to? Where's the Luke I admire, damn it!"

'Asch...' Luke coughed again; the unmistakeable taste of blood flooded his mouth. Still, Luke reached up, as if his arms could cross space and time and reach his grieving sibling. 'Every bit of that strength... every bit of that will... I learned from you. You will win. Because... because I believe... in... you.'

The snap of Asch's will was audible. The ensuing scream consumed Eldrant's air, reverberating across the hollow fields until fire tore through him. Asch choked on every breath; each heave became a struggle as oxygen fled from his burning chest. Whether he was echoing Luke's pain, or whether the sword Asch felt plunged into his stomach was of his own doing, he would never know. Right now there was nothing but the gut wrenching agony of loss. Whatever feelings he had left, whatever charred remains still existed burned mercilessly away at him, ripped him apart piece by piece from the inside out until all Asch wanted was to die too. If there was any justice in this world, it would take him, and spare Luke instead.

Asch raked his hands across the marble ground, digging his fingers into the impenetrable rock as if he could crumble it with his frustration alone. Every moment ran through his mind, Luke's every word, his every smile. The look on his face when he'd been swept away from the manor, his mischievous grin when they'd first switched, Choral Castle, Akziuth, Daath, the Passage Rings, the Absorption Gate, the Tower of Rem; their every moment, their every experience, he watched them all. Luke's laugh, his tears, everything in between. Their fights, their pranks... their farewells, every memory had the same light, the same glow that Luke brought with him to every encounter he had. This wasn't it! This wasn't the culmination of it all!

Asch slammed his fists against the ground, opening his mouth for words that would never come. He smashed the ground again and again, desperate to feel something... anything but this overwhelming agony... anything but Luke's dying moments...anything... but for Asch there could be no greater pain and nothing changed. Not his dying heart, not Luke's final breaths... none of it. He couldn't change it... he couldn't save him... but... he couldn't just say goodbye to Luke!

Jade motioned forward but hesitated as the air before him shivered with fonons. It was bad enough not to be certain of what was going on, though given Asch's state there really was little left for the imagination. He was completely beyond reason, absolved in the fact that Luke, wherever he might be, had died, or was in the process of. It was a thought Jade brought to mind with great difficulty
and perhaps that was why he hesitated to step in further. He wished more than anything for a clearer idea of what was transpiring. For now the only thing he could say with certainty was that Asch's state of hysteria, and the sheer number of Seventh Fonons at his disposal considering their location on an entirely replicated land mass was going to spell the end to them all if something didn't happen. And happen soon.

Asch stared blankly at the ground; even the fonons swirling about him couldn't penetrate the depths of his shell-shocked mind. His only sense was that of the weakening connection to Luke. Across it there were no more words, no more thoughts... just a slowly fading consciousness. He could feel Luke's life as it waned. Asch desperately grasped at the fleeting energy. Each time it escaped spurred his fervour, each thread that fled left so few in its wake and each wisp slipped pitiless through his fingers. This wasn't over! If he had to take on Yulia herself he would spare Luke his fate! He would fight until his last breath! Until the world had no choice but to spare this one life, this one person who deserved to live more than anyone! More than anyone... more than... Why? Why couldn't this world accept Luke? Why no matter how hard he fought to protect it and everyone in it? Was this what he earned? To die cold and alone, away from his loved ones and the friends he'd died to protect? After all his sacrifices, everything he gave up... if anyone deserved better it was him!

Asch sank further into the ground, his back shaking as he heaved. His empty chest burned until every attempt to scream raked his hoarse voice and caught in his constricted throat. He choked on every breath he drew; died a little more with each fleeting second Luke's life fled. He'd give anything; do anything if it would mean Luke could survive. Even if it meant taking his place, even if it meant sacrificing everything... Luke had to survive. The world needed his light; it needed his smile more than anything. They were supposed to build a new future for the world, but how could they do it over Luke's corpse? How could he build his future if it was empty of the one thing that really mattered, damn it!

If Luke was going to disappear... if he really was going to die, then Asch wanted nothing of the world left behind.

Nothing mattered anymore... this world was nothing to him if it didn't have Luke in it. He'd always known that deep down, he had caught a glimpse of it at the Tower of Rem... All Asch ever wanted was a world in which Luke could keep smiling. For eight long years that had been his only goal. Everything he'd ever done, for Kimlasca, for Baticul, for this world... that had been the only end in mind. If now even that was lost to him then everything should... everything should just...

The Seventh Fonons began to swirl more violently than ever, resonating until even Jade was forced to cover his ears to shield them from the piercing sound. Asch was falling deeper into hysteria, completely unaware of anything around him. For a split second Jade's eyes met the boy's and seeing the emptiness behind them, he wondered if when Luke died, Asch would follow. As a researcher he knew such a thing was impossible, that there was no bond so strong as to tie to lives together in such a manner; but in that brief moment, he wondered if perhaps there was.

"Everything..." Asch's whisper was barely audible above the sound of the fonons. "Everything should just..."

"Asch, get a hold of yourself!" Jade yelled. "If you don't calm down you'll take half of Eldrant with you!"

"Everything should just vanish."

"That isn't what you want!" Jade fought his way through the fonon storm, but the force of such a massive number of Seventh Fonons pushed him back. "You don't want to destroy anything! Think
Asch! What is it you really want?"

What he wanted? He didn't have to think! He wanted his little brother back! Asch just wanted Luke, but Luke was dying! He fought and fought but no matter what he did Luke's life continued to fade. How was he supposed to live on knowing Luke would never be there when he returned home? How was he supposed to go back to the days of nothing? Borrowed dreams, hollow goals... that's all that existed before Luke. He was alone. Completely and utterly alone. No one really knew him. No one really understood him. He couldn't! He couldn't live like that again!

There was nothing he could do. All that strength, all that knowledge... everything he had gained since then meant nothing! Because he couldn't protect the one thing that mattered! He wanted it back. He needed it back. He couldn't protect the world without Luke. Didn't anyone understand? Luke's life, his hope, his dreams, his carefree smile; that was his world. He didn't care about anything! He just wanted Luke back!

"Give him back damn it!"

Jade was thrown back by the racing fonons, their wild pattern grew forceful and dangerously focused. Though not a master of the Seventh Fonon by any means, Jade had spent enough time around the boys to know the pattern the fonons followed, and a hyperresonance of this magnitude was one from which nothing on this island would escape.

"Asch!" Jade screamed but it was too late. The fonons all converged, and Jade braced himself for the inevitable explosion.

Drip.

Everything was dark. A single drop of rain fell, breaking the endless nothing. He wanted to move but his limbs were like lead, drained and detached they refused to obey his commands. He was everywhere and nowhere at the same time, an enigma that did and yet did not exist. Only a single sensation connected him to reality.

Drip.

A second drop fell to his cheek. He felt it run down along his nose, tracing, defining his face for his disconnected mind. That's right... he had been sitting against the wall... then everything had gone white and now here he was, lost in an endless darkness.

Drip.

No. He wasn't lost. He could feel his limbs now. The weight transformed into a throb, and then into a lacerating dagger that tore through him. His abdomen... that's right, he had been stabbed. The agony grew, its intensity radiating until it penetrated every inch of his being, clearly defining the body that had been lost to him just moments ago. He fought to open his eyes, but the effort alone drained him. It felt as if his very life was fleeing from him, every bit of energy was sapped and even such a simple gesture was futile.

"Luke... Luke please... don't... don't die..."

Beyond his body there was warmth... he could feel it now, a strong yet trembling pressure that embraced him. The warmth that so readily slipped away was being held in by this single gesture. It couldn't stop the life that fled, but it still surrounded him all the more tightly. No matter how much of it escaped, as long as it could hold on even a little bit longer... It wouldn't let go, it wouldn't concede the loss.
He wouldn't give up either. He refused to surrender. If it took everything he had... he would see him one last time.

Drip.

He'd promised.

Drip.

Luke's eyelids fluttered for a moment as he struggled against their weight but finally willed them open. The first thing he saw was Asch leaning over him, his emerald eyes overflowing with the warm tears that fell down onto Luke's face below them. The pain he saw painted there seized Luke's chest and despite the agony he was in, it was Luke's heart that hurt the most.

Summoning what little strength he had, Luke lifted his arm, reaching up until his hand sat on his sibling's cheek. The flow of tears increased in intensity and Asch sobbed as he placed his own hand over Luke's. With a weak smile, Luke moved his thumb, gently wiping the tears away only to have more replace them seconds later. Beyond all the suffering, the guilt, the emptiness that Luke felt, there was a single thought that stood out in Luke's mind.

It was the first time.

Since the day they'd first met all those years ago... it was the first time Luke had ever seen Asch cry.

Luke wanted to ask what was happening... how he'd gotten here. He fought with his mind, trying to coerce a string of thoughts from it but the effort left him trembling. He remembered being alone, watching the lifeless bodies on the floor, knowing soon he'd just be another one of them... but something intervened. A golden glow, warmth... and then he'd heard Asch's voice. He'd heard his name. He had to follow it. After all... Luke had promised...

Luke felt his own eyes water. Seeing his brother penetrated the numbness he'd hidden behind, tore through the false contentment with which he'd accepted reality and the weight of his fate struck Luke like a hammer to the chest. He tried to speak but he couldn't summon his voice through the grief that strangulated him. Why... why did everything suddenly hurt so much more? Why was it that seeing Asch made every fibre in his body ache in a way even his injury couldn't fathom to? Luke fought through the pain and his sobs and managed to get some oxygen into his burning lungs. He had to... he had to say something to Asch.

"I know...it's hard but... don't be sad..." Luke managed, weakening with each syllable he was able to produce. "I'm not."

Asch shook his head, unable to bring forth words, his tears increasing in intensity. Luke opened his mouth to continue but Asch placed a finger over it. It was impossible not to notice how sickeningly pale Luke's skin was against the colour of his own. The blood was everywhere; the sword that had previously stemmed the flow was now gone, leaving the mortal wound to pour mercilessly forth. Luke's once white jacket had been stained red, his healthy glow was now a sick pallor. The marble on which they sat was painted in an array fit for a massacre and still it flowed from him. To feel Luke dying was something Asch didn't think he could handle... to hold him while he did it... Asch's previously trembling hand began to shake violently. Luke weakly reached up with his free hand and took Asch's hand in his own, smiling weakly as the two trembled together.

'I'm not sad...' Luke repeated, his mental voice almost as weak as his physical one. 'If it weren't for you... I'd never have been created; I'd never have had this life. All I ever wanted... was to give back
the life you gave me. So I'm happy... I'm happy I was able to protect you this time. I lived these 8
years to the fullest... because I got to spend them with you... watching you become the amazing
person you are. You hold the world's future... and you let me be a part of that... and that made me
so happy so... please don't be sad. I don't have any regrets... I don't want you to either.'

"No... don't say that. Don't say goodbye damn it!" Asch pleaded brokenly.

'You were wrong... you know,' Luke continued, his voice barely audible even in Asch's mind.
'When you said... that it wasn't my decision to make... because it was. I chose to save you... not
because... it was written in the Score... or because I'm your replica... but because it's what I wanted
to do with my life... I wanted to... to protect you the way... you always... protected me...'

Luke exhausted his strength and his hand slipped from Asch's face. Asch grabbed his hand before
it fell to the ground, squeezing it so tightly Luke could never slip away. If he held it strongly
enough he could hold onto Luke's very life.

"No!" Asch screamed frantically, choking on his sobs as he tried to speak. "I won't- I won't let you
die! This whole damn world can go to hell! It isn't worth anything if you're not here!"

'You don't... believe that...' Luke fought to keep his eyes open, the light behind them flickering
dangerously low. 'Do me one favour...?'

"Anything!"

'Please try... to smile more...'

"I can't! Not without you!"

'I told you...before... didn't I? Luke said with one last smile. 'I'll always...'

Asch watched in denial as Luke's eyes began to slip shut, terror consuming every inch of his being.
'T'll always...be with you.'

No longer able to form words, Asch grabbed Luke, holding his body close as he poured out his
heart, feeling it break with every sob. Each passing second that Luke grew colder was another
dagger in his throat, another gut-wrenching hole in the depths of his chest that couldn't possibly be
filled. His lungs screamed for air and his sobs became heaves but the tears would not stop flowing.

"Remember..." Luke's fading voice was a whisper in his ear. "You promised... to smile... to win...
no matter... what..."

There wasn't a soul on Auldrant who couldn't feel Asch's heart snap. His violent sobs echoed across
the empty fields, giving voice to the tears that fell into Luke's blood-stained hair. There was no
measure of time for how long Asch sat there, crying into the limp body of the sibling he held so
tightly. Seconds... hours... years... it meant nothing to him. His fingers wrapped tightly in Luke's
hair, he rocked back and forth as he wept, the movement doing nothing to soothe the agony. This
couldn't be it! This couldn't be the end! He couldn't! There wasn't a life without Luke... there
wasn't.

He could feel them now; the threads of Luke's life, taut from the fight he'd put up... stretched
further than allowed. Asch frantically grabbed for them, consumed by the need to do something,
the need to fight for Luke's life. He couldn't let it end like this! Each time he lashed out, ensnaring a
thread, each time watching it snap under destiny's cruel stare. Then only three remained... and
two... then the last.
Asch refused to let go of that last strand of life, the last glimmer of the essence that was Luke. He would hold onto it as long as he had to, as long as he had breath in his body he would fight. Even if it dragged him into that endless abyss too, Asch didn't care. He wouldn't let go of Luke. He couldn't... he couldn't just give up... he couldn't let Luke die.

He waited for fate to betray him, to yank that thread from his hands like it had all the others before it. The thin fibre trembled, shivering under the weight of death's pull. Asch's soul quivered under the burden of carrying Luke's life, every ounce of strength and determination was drained from him, pouring out with the tears that fell into Luke's bloodstained hair. Still he clung to the fading essence of his little brother, grasping the last shard of hope until blood ran from him, pouring into the empty heart that waited to snap with the last of Luke's life.

The feeling was soft at first, but it only took a moment to flood him, bringing with it the energy that had so readily fled from him. A warm hand covered his own as Asch held fast to Luke's last strand of life, gently offering the last of its strength. A familiar voice flooded his mind.

*Don't let go.*

The change in the atmosphere was so sudden and so perceptible that even Jade's grief stricken companions couldn't help but notice it. The sudden shift in the Seventh Fonons in the air about them was impossible to ignore. While most had been consumed in the hyperresonance that had summoned the dying Luke to them, Asch's ensuing grief had almost restored the entire collection. The chaotic mass had swirled about, as disorganized and detracted as their master's mental state, but somehow in the last split second they'd become focused. They danced purposefully and determinately around the twins and Jade raced to establish the cause for this sudden change.

Asch still held his brother's body, crying in a manner that Jade had never witnessed in the boy. Never had he seen him so broken and so completely vulnerable. It shook the Necromancer more than he cared to admit. He'd seen Asch at his strongest, and several times at his weakest, but this was beyond all that. The incident with their mother, the Tower of Rem... nothing compared to this. Perhaps he had underestimated just how much Luke comprised the foundation of Asch's psyche. That being the case, what could possibly happen to him now that Luke was gone?

No... that wasn't right. Jade examined the twins with increased scrutiny. Luke wasn't dead, not yet. Quite the opposite really; his sickeningly grey skin almost had a hint of colour to it. How was that possible? The blood loss alone should have done the poor boy in long before now. Yet there was a distinct rise and fall to Luke's chest. Barely there, but present none the less. Blood may have painted the twins and their immediate surroundings, but there was very little that seemed to be flowing from Luke. Then suddenly the change in atmosphere made sense. The huge mass of Seventh Fonons was trying to bring the young noble back from the brink of death. But how? Neither Tear nor Natalia possessed such skill, and Asch didn't know any healing artes, even if he were sane enough to perform one.

Asch opened his eyes and behind the tears, a hint of gold danced in their emerald depths. A faint golden aura engulfed the boys; Jade sighed but couldn't hide the relief that spread across his face. He ought to have known.

"You're such an idiot!" Asch shouted, the tears still falling down his face. He held Luke tighter, burying those tears in his sibling's hair. "You don't understand anything do you? After all this time you still don't understand a damn thing!"

Asch shook his head spilling his tears all over his sibling, as if he could shake off the agony that still grasped at his chest, that still curled its tendrils around his throat. Every inch of him screamed to stop, but Asch refused to let his words be abated.
"You said I had to live, that I was capable of building a future, but I'm not! Not by myself! You've always been the reason I can build that better world. I see the way you live, the way you smile and I know the world can be a better place!" Asch fought through his sobs, each word stronger than the last as all his strength poured into the feelings he laid bare.

"Why don't you get it? Why can't I make you understand?" Asch's desperation painted the voice already muddled by tears. "All these years, all this time, it's always been you! You're the one who's always saving me! It was always you! Eight years ago I lost everything! When I had absolutely nothing it was you who was there for me! Every time I wanted to give up, you reminded me that the world can be a beautiful place. You showed me that it's okay to trust people one more time. You gave me a reason to live... a person to be... it's you who's given my life meaning! So don't go saying stupid things like I always protected you because you're wrong! You had always been the one to save me... I'm the one who owes you my life, not the other way around... So please..." Asch's body began to tremble. "Please... don't... don't disappear."

"I'm..." The whisper was soft, barely audible, but the sound of Luke's voice consumed Asch's entire world. "I'm sorry..."

Slowly Luke raised his arms, the movement painfully slow and laboured, sapping what little strength Luke seemed to have regained. Asch opened his mouth, thoughts of stopping him, telling Luke not to move... to save his strength all died on the tip of his tongue when those arms wrapped around him, holding him back.

There was no denying the weakness in Luke's movements... his gesture barely had any force; Asch could hardly perceive it, but there was a warmth there that made it the most powerful thing he had ever felt. Luke was moving... He was here... not slipping away or fading or... he was... alive...

Such an intense relief washed over Asch that he barely remained upright. All the turmoil and battered emotions that had sustained him until this point fled, leaving him completely drained. Asch held Luke tighter, letting what strength he had left pour into that single motion as his tears continued to flow.

It was gone. The void that tore through Asch had completely vanished and though it felt as if his every bit of strength had forsaken him, Asch didn't mind. The hole he thought could never be filled had disappeared. In its place a flame had lit inside of him, a warmth that nothing could extinguish. Since the day Asch had learnt all he had to look forward to was his death, he had been lost and uncertain, wandering not really knowing where he was headed, but not anymore. Asch knew exactly what it was he wanted in whatever little time he had left.

Before Asch could even utter the words from his mouth, the air grew vibrant with fonons. The Seventh Fonons that had been dancing so peacefully around them erupted into a chaotic formation that spoke of destruction rather than healing. Asch struggled to gather what shreds of his mind remained to figure out what was going on. As if gravity had doubled, a sudden intense pressure came crashing down on them. What was going on?

The ground beneath them was alight. The carvings Asch had so conveniently dismissed previously were now glowing in a pattern that had been invisible until moments ago. Though Asch didn't know the arte, even in his state of mind he knew its implications.

They were right in the middle of a trap.

The arte intensified, gathering even more fonons as it raced towards completion. Asch's eyes darted frantically about; there had to be something that he could do. He hadn't made it through all that to lose Luke now! But what could he do? He barely had the strength to think much less come up with
some kind of counter measure. Maybe if he used a hyperresonance to destroy the glyph he could stop the arte... but the weariness consuming him made Asch uneasy. He wondered if he could manage a hyperresonance without disappearing. If it would save Luke... he'd risk it. He'd risk everything.

Luke grabbed Asch's sleeve, weakly trying to sit himself up, fighting against the trap's binding effects with each motion. Asch tried to stop him, but Luke wouldn't be deterred and managed to pull himself to Asch's eye level. Asch met his brother's gaze. His skin was no longer the deathly grey it had been minutes earlier though it was still dangerously pale. Such a relief embraced Asch that a smile crept to his face. Yes he would do anything to protect Luke. Even if he risked-

Luke's glare sharpened in protest and without words Asch could tell Luke knew exactly what he was thinking. Just as wordlessly Asch could read Luke's thoughts, and he realized how foolish he was being. He was no longer surprised that Luke knew exactly what he wanted, what he needed most of all; and perhaps it was because they were both thinking the same thing, but Asch felt connected to Luke on a level he'd never felt before. Luke's message was loud and clear and for once Asch agreed completely.

'No more,' Asch declared, looking Luke straight in the eye, the golden light still hiding deep within. 'No more sacrifices, no more risking our lives to protect each other.'

Luke nodded softly, betraying the weakness that still lingered behind his determination.

'No more... going alone,' Luke agreed.

The fonons began to swirl intently; the arte reaching its final stages as the air about them seemed to shimmer. Suddenly the weight the trap had laid on them felt meaningless, the bind broken by some unseen force. Asch raised his arm, and with a weak grin Luke clasped his brother's hand.

The golden light exploded from the twins, spreading out across the entire field, sweeping it with a force that instantly deadened all the fonons. The glyph on the ground was wiped clean, dispersing in a burst of light that melted into the golden glow that had consumed it. From a chaotic mess, the air fell silent, even the wind abating as the light dissipated leaving a faint glow outlining the boys from which it had originated.

'Whatever happens from here on,' Asch stated. 'We face it together.'

"Promise?"

Luke met Asch's shimmering gaze, a hint of his old energy returning in the firm nod he gave. The golden glow about them faded into the afternoon air.

"Promise."
It was a small change, one that the former Commandant wouldn't have normally registered. Still fighting to recover, Van felt the previously soft easterly breeze shift into a colder northern wind that cut through his tan hair and pulled the loose strands from his eyes. As meaningless as it seemed, it was a change, something foreign to this place that had once stood isolated from the tainted world below. Things had started moving, fate began to turn its wheel and the wind was just another reminder of that which was to come.

Still heaving, Van clutched his fists willing the last of the Seventh Fonons within him to settle. They still struggled against his control but his will was iron and they were forced into submission. Only when the last of them had been coerced back into their slumber did Van dare to relax. The energy that fled from him surprised the Commandant; though he could say the same of the entire chain of events that had just transpired. It had been weeks since Lorelei had resisted him, months since the being had stood a chance against the Commandant's unyielding resolve; but somehow in the last few minutes Lorelei had completely consumed him and it had taken every bit of that strength to keep it from escaping outright.

Even now the traces of their battle still lingered; the fire that had torn through him still burned within his confines, the piercing resonance of fonons rung in his ears and the sense of being ripped in two had yet to completely subside. Van took a second deep breath, relishing the icy wind that extinguished the heat in his chest. The embers were dying now, fading into a state of mere existence. There was no longer a sense of self to the being; the rebellious spirit, the feelings of anger, resentment, and sorrow that Van had to contend with all this time had all but disappeared. Lorelei was completely exhausted; he had been defeated.

Minutes like hours he'd endured, trying to grasp everything that was happening. What had suddenly inspired such a state in the being that had accepted its confinement for so long? There was still a lingering panic, desperation to escape the likes of which Van had never felt from it before. It had clawed its way from his confines; drawing on strength that long should have been exhausted. Where had Lorelei found such power? Such raw and sheer will that it had shaken even Van's own resolve? He'd not have thought the being still capable of such a feat, but whatever reserves it had drawn upon, were now depleted; the only consolation to Van who was still reeling from the clash of wills.

Van didn't doubt the sudden change in Lorelei must have involved Asch and his replica in some way. Other than its constant pines for freedom, they were the only consideration the being seemed to have. Were they the source of Lorelei's sudden burst of strength? Had the being drawn upon their energies somehow, or rather had something happened to them that stirred the slumbering creature? Van continued to ponder as he composed himself. He doubted the replica had such will; maybe Asch had been the source after all. It mattered not, really. Regardless of how much Asch and his little friends thought they were defying fate, Van knew they would come.

To destroy the score. To free the world. Asch would come.

No matter the challenges that stood in his way.

Tear couldn't recall how she'd reached this point. The past few minutes stretched like a lifetime behind her, consumed with a confusion and grief that the melodist couldn't even begin to handle. When she'd first heard Asch fall to his knees she'd assumed he'd tripped again. No one had missed his stumble on the stairs earlier; his mind was on something else entirely and he hadn't fooled any
of them. This time Tear hadn't even turned to look, but when he didn't get right back up, or mutter some kind of half-hearted excuse, she knew right away something was wrong. There was only one thing that ever left Asch so distracted.

Asch hadn't responded to any of their questions, and the more any of them demanded answers, the more Tear felt her chest seizing. What could possibly be happening? What had Luke gotten himself into? Was he in trouble? Hurt somewhere? How could they make it back to him in time? Was that what Asch was doing? Trying to figure out where Luke was? Or was he trying to help him directly?

The first words out of Asch's mouth set Tear's heart racing, each beat pounded on her lungs, knocking the air from her a breath at a time. The words Asch spoke could only be for a single person, and the desperation with which he pleaded Luke not to give up was enough to destroy whatever air intake Tear had left. Then Asch said the three words that sent Tear's world spiralling out of control.

You can't die!

The mind Tear had once counted upon to stand resolute and strong in any situation suddenly faltered. D-Die? Impossible! Asch's state told her that Luke was in trouble, and he'd have to be in a lot of trouble to shake Asch the way he had, but there was no way he could be dying. Her mind couldn't even consider the possibility. No matter how hard she thought about it, no matter how many times she tried to bring back her thoughts and feelings from the Tower of Rem, she couldn't seem to process it. Luke had always pulled through! He had always come back to her! This would be no different. To think that she'd never see Luke again, that she'd never see his smile, never hear his laugh... the thought was so cold Tear daren't touch it. She knew she'd find herself as lost and broken as Asch was if she did and Tear couldn't allow that. She would believe in Luke's strength if no one else would.

Everyone around Tear seemed to be just as frantic as she was, the only person standing firm was Jade, his eyes hidden behind the glare on his glasses. Cold and unreadable, for a moment Tear envied him such a stable disposition but such feelings were quickly choked out by another wave of worry. Besides, Tear knew he was just as concerned as the rest of them. No one would be settled until they got some concrete answers. They wouldn't find any peace until they saw Luke again, until they could see for themselves how groundless their fears were, and their fears were groundless... weren't they?

Tear wanted to be sure, she was desperate to be certain there was nothing to worry about, but the melodist found the task impossible. Asch just kept yelling, half a conversation that was impossible to decipher yet still left her doubts swelling until she could hardly think through them. She fought to keep her composure, struggled to force the air into her screaming lungs, to keep her heart steady. Asch's sudden silence came as a blessing. Surely it meant that Luke had managed to escape; Luke had just scared Asch, gotten into such a pinch that Asch had jumped to conclusions. Luke would be right after them in no time. That had definitely not been the last time she'd see him. He'd never leave her... never vanish so suddenly like that. She hadn't even the chance to say goodbye. No... Luke would definitely be okay.

Then Asch screamed. There were no words; just a storm of raw emotions drowning in a sea of searing agony that burned through everyone who heard it. The sound was a dagger that ripped Tear's chest open and left her silently screaming for air. Whatever frail foundation Tear had built, whatever supposed confidence she had in Luke's wellbeing was hopelessly shattered and the falling pieces cut through every inch of her in a rain of broken glass. It just wasn't possible... Luke wasn't- wasn't- Tear couldn't even bring the word to mind. There was just no way this was
happening; it was all just a misunderstanding... Luke was fine. Denial dulled the pain's edge but a constant ache still clung to the melodist. The refusal to accept the inevitable, the loss that was impossible to consider, the gaping hole left behind, Asch's voice carried all these things and they echoed through her ears and mind until the fire in her chest consumed her every sense. She couldn't... she couldn't lose Luke. After everything they'd been through, how far they'd all come together. They would be finishing it together, right? Luke wasn't gone. He couldn't be... Asch screamed again.

Fighting through the emotions that tore through her, Tear scarcely noticed the Seventh Fonons until the sound of them resonating overwhelmed her senses. The fonon of sound swirled so intently, so dangerously, that it drew her from her storming thoughts long enough to establish the imminent danger. Asch was out of control, so consumed by grief that he had no idea what he was doing... no idea of the scale upon which his hyperresonance would destroy. Tear opened her mouth, trying to call out to him. Luke didn't want this! He would never want to see everything destroyed... she just had to get through to Asch! But her voice caught in her throat, choking on tears the melodist couldn't begin to control. The fonons converged, but the hyperresonance never came.

That was when Tear saw Luke again. Seeing him, seeing his face wiped everything from her mind. She only wondered for a moment how he'd arrived, what had happened to the hyperresonance she'd feared. No, it had occurred. Hadn't it been a hyperresonance that had started it all? That had first brought her and Luke together when they'd been transported to Tataroo Valley? And here it had brought them together again. This time she wouldn't let him out of her sight. She wouldn't take her eyes off him. She'd see him for exactly how he was-

It was then Tear noticed all the blood.

She only vaguely remembered falling, everything around her seemed to simultaneously collapse as Tears buckled under her own weight. Someone caught her, but Tear couldn't even register who had broken her fall. All she knew was that the cold marble beneath her slowly crept up her veins until they'd curled themselves around her throat, suffocating her with each passing second she sat staring in shock. From Asch's hands, to Luke's jacket, to the ground around them, the blood was everywhere. It seemed to pour mercilessly from the body that lay so limply in asch's arms. Tear didn't know what to think, she didn't know how to think. Suddenly the future opened before her, echoing with thoughts of hollow days, her heart lying frigid in a world without her sunshine.

She had to move, she had to get up. Years spent training; spent learning to tame her emotions in the face of battle suddenly seemed to fail her. Luke was dying! She couldn't just sit here and watch it happen! She had to get to him! She had to heal him! Why? Why couldn't she move? Every nerve in her body seared in protest as she begged her limbs to respond. Instead of moving, the weight over her doubled. It was no longer just her heart that was being crushed by grief. Every single inch of her felt inexorably bound to the marble, buckled under an invisible force that was smothering her until it felt like lead that flowed through her every vein, pinning her to the ground.

Her mind warred with whatever remained of her heart, fighting to stand, to go toLuke regardless of the binds her emotions had placed on her. After everything Luke had done for her, every struggle he had ever fought through for her sake, every burden he'd ever carried, she couldn't fail him now!

Tear tried again to stand, but fell to the ground as if someone had struck her, gravity tying her to the marble below. This wasn't just some trick of her mind, or play of her inescapable feelings, the weight she felt was real, and it wasn't until she noticed this that Tear realized all her friends were fighting against the same invisible force she was. The ground beneath her lit up, drawing out an unfamiliar arte across the marble floor. Though it was foreign to her, Tear didn't need to know the specifics to realize they were caught in a trap.
How had this happened? How had they gotten so tangled in her brother's web? Even Jade hadn't noticed anything... so why? Why now of all times? Her tears hitting the cold stone below, Tear found her answer. The tracings on the ground, only half of them were lit, only half the carving below them was the arte. The remainder must have been part of the original structure... the ideal camouflage. It was a perfect trap and each and every one of them had fallen for it. Was this how things were meant to be? Was this the future Yulia had chosen... for Luke to die and the rest of them to follow? Was that what she had wanted for the world?

No, it couldn't end like this! She wouldn't let her brother, let the Score win! Even if... even if the unspeakable happened, even if she lost her own personal sunshine, Tear refused to give up. No matter how hollow the storm of grief had left her, she would keep fighting. For Luke, and for the world he'd wanted more than anything! She would see that world become a reality if it cost her her life. She just had to stand!

Fighting the effects of the arte, Tear could feel the fonons as they began to cumulate. It wasn't an arte meant to bind, it was meant to obliterate what it had ensnared. They were out of time! Unable to get up, Tear dragged herself forward, inching towards the boys. They had to escape! She couldn't let this be the ending... they had to fight! They had to win! She couldn't- She couldn't let them die!

Tear registered the golden glow only moments before it engulfed her. Bracing herself, Tear only felt a calm warmth flow gently over her like a wave lapping over the shore. Bathed in the serenity and calm of the blanket of Seventh Fonons, every weight that pinned the melodist down vanished and as suddenly as it had advanced, the glow dispersed, taking the entire glyph with it as it burst and glittered into the afternoon air.

Sitting herself up, Tear felt lighter than she could ever recall feeling, like she could drift off on the breeze with the scattered fonons; like she'd never been weighed down in her life. It was only a second, a brief glimpse of freedom before the weight returned. Not the all encompassing pressure that she had just escaped, but a hollow weight that started in her chest and seeped through her as the reason she had been crushed in the first place came back to her.

Tear didn't know if she had the courage to look up from the bloodstained ground. She knew the sight that awaited her... how could she not. How many times had she seen death on the battlefield? How many corpses had she pushed aside for her own ambitions, or for those of her superiors? Death was not something foreign to her... so why? Why was she so afraid to look up?

Yet the thought of seeing Luke that way paralyzed her. A bloody, lifeless doll dangling limply in Asch's arms... she couldn't handle that. She didn't want to remember him that way... not cold, writhed in pain. She wanted to cling to his care-free smile, to his laughter, his tears for the fallen, his gentleness, his kindness... she didn't want those precious memories drowned out by the sight of a body.

"Are you alright?"

Asch's voice consumed Tear's every thought. The implications of such a steady, calm voice coming from the uncontrollable mess that had been there moments ago had barely begun to work their way through her mind. It couldn't be...

Tear's gaze flew up, passing the pools of blood spattered across the earth, past the shreds of fabric, past the once white jacket that was now stained red, past everything except the Luke who was sitting before Asch. His skin was still deathly pale, the only colour coming from a faint golden glow that still seemed to encompass him. His hand was planted firmly in Asch's, the only support he had as he wobbled unsteadily, but Tear saw past all of it. All she saw was his green eyes as they
met Asch's, his mouth move as he replied something so softly she didn't hear it. He was... he was alive... Luke was actually alive.

Relief washed over her like a torrent of water, taking all her strength and energy with it. The burning in Tear's chest reminded her she'd forgotten to breathe and tears streamed silently down her cheeks. That... That idiot! Did he realize how many years of her life she'd just lost? How could he do that? How could he scare her like that? Tear senselessly wiped the water from her cheeks. She was going to give him a piece of her mind once this was done!

Luke began to sway more violently, fighting to maintain his grasp on consciousness as the last of the golden glow faded away. Losing the battle, his eyes fell shut and he collapsed. Every imagined transgression instantly forgotten, Tear scrambled towards him but her feet tangled in themselves and she crashed onto the marble floor. Embarrassed, she quickly righted herself in time to see Asch catch his brother. Luke cracked open his eyes again and Tear released the breath she'd been holding. Steadying himself against his sibling, it became evident just how weak he still was. That didn't matter though... because he was going to survive. Luke was going to be okay.

"Need some help?" Natalia's voice seemed almost foreign on Tear's ears. It wasn't until she saw her best friend smiling down at her, offering a hand up, that Tear realized how completely she'd tuned out the world. Though her expression was happy, Natalia's eyes were still red, her gloves wrinkled and stained with tears. Looking at her surroundings for the first time in an eternity, Tear felt as if she were waking from a dream. Anise's eyes looked redder than Natalia's, and Tokunaga was still ensnared in her arms. If the poor doll were alive, it would have been suffocated long ago. Guy had turned his back, hiding whatever display he had made, and Jade seemed as untouched as ever, save for the warm smile on his face.

"Thank you," Tear replied, accepting the gesture, allowing the help to her feet. She took a deep breath, calming herself as best she could. Her heart still fluttered, a mix of nervousness and sheer elation. Though she still felt exhausted, there was a satisfaction she couldn't erase from her mind. Since losing them on Eldrant's outskirts, everything had been off kilter, everything just felt wrong... but no more. The world was right again.

"What a touching reunion."

The sneer drew everyone's attention and the flash of green hair had Jade silently cursing the God-General's timing. Not that he expected any less. The trap they'd triggered wouldn't have been unmanned, and given its use of the Seventh Fonon and the sheer force it had displayed, Jade would wager it was some form of Daathic fonic arte, further strengthened by the excessive number of Seventh Fonons that were still abound no doubt. Jade stepped forward defensively, in case Sync decided their shaken and weakened state warranted no pause before his assault. Jade immediately noted the brief hesitance in their foe; something wasn't quite right with the God-General. As much as Sync tried to hide it behind a sneer and cocky posture, there was a confusion in his eyes that was evident. He didn't have any more idea than Jade did as to what had happened to his trap, and he wanted to know exactly what he was getting into.

Standing on a rock overlooking his opponents, Sync's cold analytical eyes scanned each of them in turn, as if daring them to speak up, to explain who had ruined his perfect snare. Finally his eyes settled on Luke and Asch, lingering longer than Jade was comfortable with when he saw shock sweep across Sync's face. The boys? They couldn't have disarmed the arte. Asch had still been unstable, to put it mildly, and Luke, well he could barely stand now, much less have done anything to disrupt the glyph at the time. Regardless, it wasn't as if the arte was halted, it had been outright disintegrated, neutralized with the utmost finality. Jade knew of few powers that could achieve such a thing. Even among fonic theorists there was only...
Impossible... Jade visited the thought but considered it with great difficulty. A second order hyperresonance? Such a thing had never been witnessed, it existed only in theory; an occurrence so rare that few thought it even possible at all. If two simultaneous hyperresonance were to interact, it was believed to possess the power to neutralize the effect of any and all fonons. Even if he were to account for the twins' unique power, to have that level of synchronization... between two separate individuals? It shouldn't be possible. Yet, what other explanation was there?

"Impressive feat for a corpse," Sync taunted, sneering at Luke, who failed to maintain his balance, even with Asch holding him up. The look in his eyes told Jade he'd come to the same conclusion, and wasn't quite so hesitant to accept it as the truth. "Too bad for you, a power like that might actually pose a threat to Van."

"What do you want," Asch demanded.

"Easy," Sync answered, every trace of his previous hesitation gone. "I just need for you to die."

In a flash Sync launched himself from his perch, diving at the unprotected redheads. Adrenaline kicking in, Tear jumped in front of the pair. Her hair still flowing about her, the barrier flew up, protecting her friends from the sudden assault. Tear's determination hardened into an iron will. She had almost lost Luke once; sat helplessly on the sidelines and watched him bleed, and she was not going to let that happen ever again. She would protect what mattered and would defend those she cared about. This time she would take fate into her own hands!

Sync collided with the barrier, recoiling with all the grace they'd come to expect from the last remaining God-General. A scant few seconds after he'd launched his assault, Sync stood on the white marble, coldly staring them down.

With no intention of allowing them a moment to gather themselves, Sync attacked again but Jade was ready and the arte he launched cut Sync's trajectory, only grazing the boy as he swiftly dodged the strike. Anise and Guy jumped in the fray, diverting Sync from his initial target, but not moving quickly enough to pin down the speedy God-General.

Sync had certainly not slowed since their previous encounter at Choral Castle, and even bearing no arms he was a force to be reckoned with. His punches could match any mace, his kicks held untold force behind them. Adding to that his speed and array of artes, he was not going to be a foe they could simply brush past. His identity long since revealed, Sync proved he'd inherited more Daathic sonic artes than the curse slot they'd seen from him and the fight grew ever more complex. He fought with a certain level of abandon, Jade noted. He wasn't being reckless, but he had no future battles in mind, no reason to spare them his full strength. For him, this would be was a battle to the death and Jade had every intention of obliging him.

"Why are you fighting us, Sync?" Anise asked, ducking as Tokunaga absorbed several of Sync's punches.

"I guess I should learn to expect that level of stupidity from you by now." Sync pounded Tokunaga with an arte, sending Anise flying from its back. Natalia launched an arrow that grazed Sync's arm, forcing him from the recovering Fon Master Guardian. "I fight because the Score needs to be destroyed!"

"You can't tell me you believe in the crap the Commandant is spewing do you?" Anise demanded. "Don't you realize he's going to kill you once his plan succeeds?"

"Why should I care what happens to me?" Sync asked between his attempts to disarm Guy. "I came into this world a piece of trash, I'll go out as one."
"Are you talking about how they almost threw you into Mt. Zaleho?" Anise asked. "Are you really going to destroy the whole world because Mohs is a good for nothing pig?"

"This has nothing to do with Mohs!" Sync fought back. "It has to do with the Score, the Score didn't decree that I would die, it was the reason I was born in the first place! Van saved me from the fires so that I could help him eliminate that curse from this world, and I have every intention of doing it!"

Sync overpowered Guy and the blond took a sharp blow to the stomach, following up his attack, Sync was knocked off balance by Tokunaga who sent him flying across the battlefield. Quickly recovering, Sync renewed his assault, but Anise matched his attacks, allowing Guy the chance to force some air back into his lungs. Natalia fired a volley of arrows, none of which hit their mark but forced Sync back none-the-less.

"Surely you needn't be so beholden to Van for saving your life," Natalia stated, pulling her bowstring taut. "It doesn't mean you have to follow him into this madness!"

"You think I'm following Van because he saved me?" Sync's kick knocked Natalia's arrow clean out of the air. "Don't be ridiculous. Why should I feel indebted to him for saving something so worthless? Thanks to the Score I've been forced to live this meaningless existence. Frankly I don't care who it is as long as the Score and the Seventh Fonon are destroyed for good."

"For someone who considers his life worthless, you fight awfully hard to protect it," Jade pointed out.

"Shut it Necromancer, I won't let you stop Van's plans to eliminate the Score."

"Do you really hate your life that much?" Anise asked incredulously, unable to keep the sorrow out of her tone.

"Don't pity me you worthless scum!" Sync stuck Anise, his hit landing cleanly across her face. The taste of blood exploded in her mouth and she skid across the ground, Tokunaga breaking her impact. Natalia ran to her side, and Jade's arte forced Sync back several steps where the recovered Guy intervened. "Everyone, life itself treats me like the garbage I am, why should I give a damn what happens to anyone?"

"Everyone treated you like garbage?" Guy asked.

"Tch," Sync spat. "They would if they knew the truth."

"You don't know that!" Anise insisted, climbing back onto Tokunaga. "You can't say for sure that-"

"Oh can it," Sync cut the girl off. "You just need another replacement now that the other Ion kicked the bucket. Well guess what? I'll never be Fon Master for you, so give it up with the pretty speeches!"

"You're right," Anise replied, a renewed determination in her voice. "You'll never be able to replace Ion. Ion was precious and no one will ever be able to take his place. We don't want you to even try it! You're not Ion, you're Sync! Stop being whoever other people tell you to be! You're no different than Arietta was, always listening to someone else and what they want. If you had to make a decision for yourself you'd be lost, so instead you just convince yourself that you have no other choices, that way you don't have to make them."

"Don't compare me to that failure," Sync retorted.
"Arietta was not a failure!" Anise's mace narrowly missed its mark and Sync was forced on the defensive. "Sure she might have been annoying and made her share of mistakes, but she died fighting for something she really believed in. She died for her own dream, not someone else's! You convince yourself that destroying the Score is what you want, but you gave up so long ago that you never even tried coming up with a purpose yourself. Of course you won't find any meaning in your life, you've never lived it!"

"Don't act as if you know the first thing about me!" Sync retaliated and the two clashed again. Guy dove in but Sync easily matched both fighters. In a single fluid motion, Sync slipped down, knocking Guy's feet out from under him and nailing him to the ground.

Natalia forced Sync back with an arte of her own, but even with Jade and Anise's assistance, they were slowly being overpowered. Someone had to tend to Guy... Natalia glanced behind her and found Tear still standing defensively before the twins. She had the right idea, they didn't dare weaken their guard, it was the boys that Sync was really after. If they died it would be game over for everyone. Natalia nodded, indicating she would tend to the fallen Guy and Tear returned with a grateful smile. She just couldn't leave Luke unprotected right now.

"Luke, no," Asch argued and Tear glanced behind her long enough to see Luke reaching for his blade that Asch still held onto. He'd been carrying Luke's sword as well as his own since the two had parted companies. Tear had noticed at the time but hadn't inquired, partially because she knew she didn't want to hear the answer.

"They need our help," Luke insisted, though his argument lacked any strength. The younger redhead stood up but nearly fell over again, caught at the last minute by his sibling.

"See what I mean," Asch argued, not having it in him to get angry with Luke. "You've lost way too much blood, you can barely stay on your own two feet, much less fight. Whether you like it or not, you're sitting this one out. And no artes either!" Asch cut Luke off before he had the chance to even think it. Luke opened his mouth, but was so light-headed he barely got a protest out. Conceding Asch's point, Luke sat back down, and focused on not passing out for the third time in the last ten minutes.

"Luke's right though," Asch stated to the melodist. "They're not going to be able to beat him on their own like that. Can I leave him to you?"

"Of course," Tear replied firmly. "I'll protect him no matter what it takes."

"I know you will," Asch said with a smile and a nod. "Just make sure you protect him from himself too," he added, more as a jab to the disgruntled Luke sitting on the ground.

For one last moment, Tear briefly caught a look in Asch's eyes. They seemed deeper somehow, as if the walls that had once been around him had finally given way, and for the first time, Tear felt like she and Asch had actually connected.

"One more fool added to the bunch," Sync taunted, dodging Asch's initial assault, still going toe to toe with the redhead and his comrades.

"I'm the fool? Don't even get me started!" Asch retorted. "You use the fact that you're a replica to invalidate your existence but that's not true. You can be a replica and still find meaning in your life."

"All of you and your idealist crap; you're like a broken record. You make me sick!"
"No you're the one who makes me sick!" Asch fired back. Sync danced around Asch's blade, and the redhead's frustration grew as he met nothing but air. Asch knew he wasn't in the right frame of mind. He was still shaken from Luke's brush with death, and still didn't have his feelings in check... but he'd be damned if Luke had survived that only to be killed by Sync now.

"Awww," Sync sneered condescendingly. "Does the naive little baby not like the fact that some lives are just worthless? That not everything is precious and needs to be protected? Can't take the fact that a replica is nothing but a throwaway?"

"The only thing that's worthless, is that trap of yours so do us all a favour and shut it!" Asch snapped, but his defence broke and Sync slipped through. Sync's kick felt like a brick to his chest and Asch was knocked back several paces. Guy jumped in, forcing Sync off the redhead, meeting the God-General's flurry with an assault of his own.

Asch coughed, trying to get some oxygen back into his system and berated himself for making such an idiotic mistake. Why was he letting Sync get him so riled up? Was it the way he went on about replicas? No, Asch knew exactly why every word Sync uttered pissed him off. Sync didn't value his life at all. He had time, he had a future... Sync had something Asch and Luke wanted more than anything, and he was throwing it away for nothing.

"Maybe you are a waste of space," Asch said with a laugh, calling Sync's attention back to him from the blond he was slowly overwhelming. "You're a waste because you don't realize how good you've got it!" Asch launched the first attack and was met by Sync's fist who easily deflected the blade. "You squander everything whining about how your life is meaningless, you use the fact that you're a replica as an excuse to call yourself a throwaway, but it's all a load of crap. Luke was born no differently than you; he was born to replace me, to be discarded in Akzeriuth by Van but that doesn't make his entire life meaningless!"

"You could never understand," Sync spat. "That replica is not the same as I was, he had a purpose, he was needed by someone. I was salvaged from the trash because there was a chance I might be useful, to be thrown back once I'm not anymore. You could never understand what it's like to have no one or nothing need you!"

Asch froze at those words, shadows from past creeping through his ears. Narrowly dodging a strike, Asch unleashed a flurry of ice that forced the God-General back, and in the split second his eyes met Sync's they looked painfully familiar. What would have happened to Asch if Luke had never needed him all those years ago? What would he have done had he never found a sense of purpose for his life? Would he be like Sync was now, alone and chasing death, desperate for an escape?

"You're right, maybe we don't understand," Anise intervened. "But you don't understand anything either. That's why you're following Van, because you don't understand why you were allowed to live, and you're scared of the answer!"

"I follow Van because he's vowed to destroy the Score! The Score caused me to live as nothing more than a piece of meat, so I'll destroy the entire thing!"

"You're wrong!" Luke's voice echoed across the battlefield. Asch spun around, cursing him for drawing attention to himself, but not really able to say he was surprised. He had an arm over Tear's shoulder for support, but he was back on his feet. The only thing that re-assured Asch he wouldn't do anything dumb was that Asch still had his sword.

"Big words from someone who can barely stand," Sync laughed and attacked the vulnerable duo. His attack screeched to a halt a scant few feet before them, and scoffed. He wasn't going to make
the same mistake twice and the ice in Tear's eyes told him he wasn't getting through her barrier while she was still breathing, or at least while she was still focusing. She couldn't keep it up forever, he'd get them eventually.

"Maybe," Luke continued, looking Sync straight in the eye with an unwavering gaze that unnerved the young God-General. "But you're still wrong. If you want to blame the Score for being born, go right ahead; but every moment after that was up to you. It may be the Score's fault that you were born a piece of meat, but it's your fault you lived like one!"

Sync's eyes narrowed and he struck the barrier with all the force he could throw behind a punch. The air crackled as his attack and Tear's will collided, but the barrier was flawless and Sync was forced back. Jade's arte was over him in a flash, and Sync was hasty to dodge the rocks that spurred up from the earth. Several arrows flew at him, and though he managed to dodge each of them, he ended up face to face with Guy.

"It's a pity you sided with these fools," Sync sneered at Guy whose sheath narrowly missed the boy's head. Sync retaliated with a punch at his core, buy Guy wouldn't make the same mistake twice and he sidestepped the strike. His sword was met by Sync's fist who easily knocked the flat of the blade away. "You made for such a useful pawn."

"That's not going to work, you know," Guy replied. "Come to think of it, I probably owe you a thank you for that." Guy swung wide, forcing Sync back several paces.

"What are you talking about?"

"If it weren't for that curse slot, I never would have confronted my past; I never would have had the courage to face Luke and Asch with the truth. So really, I should be thanking you." Guy attacked again, but Sync dodged wider, evading not only the blond's strike but the Necromancer's arte. A second arte flew seamlessly after the first and it was only years of refining his speed that saved Sync from the blast of heat he could still feel shimmering in the air beside him.

"Naive, good for nothing idiots, every one of you!" Sync spat. "I can't believe you buy that crap!"

Asch intercepted Sync as he decided to test Tear's focus again, this time landing a hit that drew blood from Sync's arm. The God-General attacked, completely unfazed by the injury. His blood spattered across his uniform, flying from the laceration as his strikes increased in intensity. Asch lunged, but Sync leapt overhead and the redhead hastened to evade his landing. Sync arte shredded the marble ground, sending dust flying into the air and everyone into a fit of coughing. Anise jumped in front of Natalia just in time for Tokunaga to absorb most of the force from Sync's ensuing attack but the God-General wasn't deterred and Anise took a second blow to the head.

"You could never understand the torment I've been through, the pain of being forced to live on as an expendable piece of trash. You all live the high life; I don't need or want your pathetic ideals or sense of justice."

"Who decided you're expendable?" Asch demanded, forcing Sync from his injured companion and his fiancée who was tending to her. "Who made the choice that you can just be thrown away at any point?"

"No one did, I was always expendable! Mohs threw me away a few pathetic hours after I was born. I was never worth anything more than that!"

"You let Mohs decide you're worthless?" Anise asked, pulling herself up onto Tokunaga's back.
"Anise!" Natalia protested but she wouldn't be dissuaded.  

"You let that pig decide for you that you were a piece of trash?" Anise continued, her fervour giving her some of her energy back. "I can't believe you! Sure we might not have always seen eye to eye, but I had more respect for you than that!"

"Tch," Sync spat. "Respect? You never respected me, no one ever has. Who respects the dirt on their shoes, or the meat rotting in a back alley? You're full of inflated ideas and pretty words."

"That's a load of crap Sync! Lots of people respected you. You were the tactical leader of the God-Generals, you were the Chief of Staff! No one else did that Sync, you did! Those people all respected you for your skills and your talents, not because of what you are or why you were born."

"You expect me to be impressed? Why should I care if scum looked up to me?"

"Fine!" Anise swung wildly at the God-General, letting her growing frustration fuel every blow. "If your life is so worthless and pathetic, why are you even still here? Why didn't you just throw yourself off a cliff two years ago?"

"I won't die until I see Lorelei perish!" Sync unleashed a Daathic arte whose blast sent everyone stumbling back, the conjured wind tearing through the air like daggers, landing hits on each of them. Sync wasted no opportunity and struck out at Anise who was still trying to regain her balance.

"It's about time you admit your life has some purpose." Jade forced Sync back with several energy blasts and Guy intercepted him as he renewed his assault. Back on his feet, Asch sparred only a moment to ensure that Tear's barrier had held through Sync's arte before rejoining the fray.

"Are you okay?" Tear asked her charge.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Luke replied, more strength returning to his voice each time he spoke. Tear couldn't help but notice how much of his colour had returned and while he still used her for support, what had once been all his weight on her shoulder was now only a mild pressure. She smiled, though she couldn't help but wonder how Luke was improving so quickly. True she had using every moment she could spare some of her focus to heal him, but she didn't dare take down her barrier for long and knew full well that she hadn't given him that much assistance.

"What do you have there?" Tear inquired, noticing a lump tucked away in the nook of his free arm.

"Oh." Luke held out the object so she could see it, but not so much that their opponent might take notice. It was the Jewel of Lorelei. Tear was somewhat relieved, ever since she'd seen him rummaging through Asch's pack earlier, she'd been worried he intended to try and join the fight somehow. Tear doubted Luke's recovery would continue quite so smoothly if he decided to try exerting himself.

"But wait..." Tear realized something. "Doesn't the Jewel-"

"Scatter fonons?" Luke finished. "Yeah, it's supposed to, so I can't say I really understand how it works either."

It suddenly hit Tear why Luke had gone looking for it in Asch's affairs at such a peculiar time. It was the Jewel that was helping him recover so quickly.

"I noticed it after the Tower of Rem," Luke continued when he noted the question in her eyes. "When I had it on me, it always helped me recover my energy faster. It may scatter fonons, but it
has some kind of healing properties to it too."

"That seems strange," Tear commented, her eyes still following the battle. In a heartbeat her barrier flew up again and Sync collided with it, scoffing in disappointment while using it to recoil back at Asch who had chased him down. The battle moved away again but Tear was reminded she couldn't let herself be too distracted.

"Is it really so strange?" Luke asked. "The Sword and Jewel were gifts from Lorelei to Yulia; the Sword to strike down her enemies... and the Jewel to heal her wounds. They were made to look after her and care for her in her struggle."

"Lorelei told you a lot."

"Not really, I'm just guessing," Luke admitted. "But I think I understand how Yulia and Lorelei felt back then. Raising the Outer Lands... creating the Score, it must have been really hard for them to accomplish, and I don't think they had much support. And here we are, undoing everything they worked so hard for."

"But that's also part of what they wanted, right?" Tear smiled.

"Yeah," Luke agreed. "I just wish that people like Sync and Master Van could see that. I wish they could accept that the future can always change."

"Some people are just too stubborn that way, I'm afraid," Jade cut in.

"Jade!" Luke was startled by the Colonels sudden interruption. He almost laughed at himself, Asch was right, he'd never survive this fight, he'd practically tuned out the rest of the world around him. It was still just so hard to focus on more than one thing at a time.

"Glad to see you're well enough to be entertaining at the very least," Jade replied, though his taunting aura immediately faded and the air about him almost seemed to crackle. "Though the two of you may want to step back a bit."

Tear and Luke silently did as they were told.

"Oh and Tear, do me a favour and lower that barrier of yours for a moment. I normally hate to use the injured as bait but you're the catch of the day I'm afraid, Luke."

"That's never stopped you before," Luke shot back and had he not been facing away, he'd have seen a smile cross Jade's face.

The movement instantly caught Sync's eye. Fools! Did they think they could slip away without him knowing? They underestimated him if they thought he was too distracted by their dumb little friends to notice their attempt to escape. The replica was already weak and barely clinging to life, all he had to do was kill him and Van will have succeeded. They made it too easy!

"Fools! You're wide open!" Sync launched himself.

\[I,\ who\ stand\ in\ the\ full\ light\ of\ the\ heavens,\ncommand\ thee,\ who\ opens\ the\ gates\ of\ hell.\nCome\ forth,\ divine\ lightning!\nThis\ ends\ now!\]

Glyphs erupted around the God-General, racing towards the blackened sky, pulling electricity from the earth as they flew upward, trapping Sync in the arte. Sync barely had time to follow their path,
when they converged into a massive lightning bolt that struck mercilessly down in a brilliant flash of light.

Electricity ripped through Sync, searing his every nerve and eliciting a cry from the normally confident boy. Knives pierced his limbs, and pain overwhelmed his senses. Every wisp of energy drained, Sync's unresponsive body was left to fall limply to the ground.

He heard his enemies approach over the ringing in his ears. He fought with his leaden arms but they refused to move. The electricity still raced through him, erasing any commands his mind might have made. This was how it was going to end? Sync silently cursed. He was pathetic to the last.

"Heh," he sneered at Asch who stood over him, that same condescending look in his eyes every one of them had. "Looks like... you win. Now... finish me off already."

Asch looked long and hard at the subdued Sync, at the harshness with which he was being regarded. It wasn't a look of defeat, of contentment; Sync still had a fire in his eyes and Asch knew that when the effects of being electrocuted wore off, Sync would be right back on his feet. He tightened the grip on his blade, but he still couldn't quite erase Sync's words from his mind.

"You could never understand what it's like to have no one or nothing need you!"

Sync had been wrong. Asch knew all too well what that felt like, and though he'd only a brief glimpse of it, he could see it in the God-General all too clearly now. Asch had been down that dark, spiteful path, and because of that, Asch knew exactly what had to be done.

"No," Asch replied, sheathing the Sword of Lorelei. The look of dread that swept across Sync's face instantly told Asch he'd made the right choice.

The look on Sync's face vanished as quickly as it had come and the God-General spat at Asch. "Stop pitying me!"

"I don't pity you, not in the least," Asch replied coldly. "You want to die?" Asch tossed a small dagger to the ground where it landed a few feet from the God-General. "Here, do it yourself. I'm not doing your dirty work for you."

"You think I wouldn't do it? Is that it?"

"I know you won't do it. If you would, you'd have done it by now."

"I'm not that weak! I won't die until the Score is destroyed!"

"It'll take hours before you're able to move any more than a crawl, days before you'd be able to fight. By the time you've recovered enough to face us, we'll have stopped Van and freed Lorelei," Asch stated simply. "No matter what you do now, the future you've been fighting for won't come to pass. So there's nothing stopping you."

"Why you!" Sync tried to move but was barely able to get onto his side.

"You use pretty excuses like destroying the Score and the Seventh Fonon to hide it but even if you don't realize it, you've got a desire to live," Asch pointed out. "I suggest you try figuring out your reasons for yourself. If you don't want to, well, that's what the dagger is for."

Asch turned his back, walking towards the temple.
"Come back and finish the job, you cowards!" Sync yelled after the departing party. Fighting against his unresponsive limbs, every inch of him screamed defiantly as he rolled over onto his stomach. Gritting his teeth, Sync raised his head, his opponents nothing but shapes in the distance, disappearing behind the temple's large doors. Damn them all, underestimating him, the worthless fools!

The sun's light glimmered off the dagger that Asch had dropped. He'd show them, he wasn't as weak as they thought he was! Inching forward, Sync weakly dragged himself along the ground towards the discarded weapon. Every inch of him still stung, coursing with the lingering electricity from that damned Necromancer's arte, but Sync wasn't about to succumb to it. Forcing his arm forward he snatched the small dagger, the effort leaving him to collapse back onto his back. A grin crossed Sync's face. Van would stop them, he took satisfaction in that. Van would show them just how weak and pathetic the whole lot of them were. He would see the Score destroyed and Lorelei killed once and for all. Sync had done his job; he was of no use anymore. The knife's tip danced dangerously close to his own neck.

Finally this worthless life would be over!

Sync flinched, his arm seizing, refusing to move. Why? Why now? The blade's tip barely pierced the skin, a small trickle of blood ran down his neck. He wasn't weak! He wasn't the pathetic sap the rest of those fools were! He didn't want to keep living this good for nothing life! Sync cursed his arms. All they had to do was plunge the knife down. Move damn it!

The steel dagger clattered across the stone ground.

Sync's frustrated scream was the last thing Asch heard before shutting the temple doors behind him, and barring them closed.

Natalia glanced backwards when she heard Sync's cry, wondering only briefly if he'd conquered Asch's challenge but realized just as quickly that she was wrong. That hadn't been the sound of someone dying... it was that of someone defeated.

"Are you sure you did the right thing?" Anise asked hesitantly. "I mean, it almost seems cruel."

"Killing him was exactly what he wanted," Asch answered. "I'm through playing into everyone's hands. We're fighting in order to protect the future, not destroy it."

"You're going to start sounding like me pretty soon," Luke teased, his voice still somewhat softer, but with much of its old energy back.

With those words, everyone's attention turned to the younger redhead. Asch couldn't help but release a sigh of relief. His colour had mostly returned and while he still seemed a bit weak, he was standing on his own and had kept up with the rest of them easily enough. Silence fell over everyone. No one knew what to do; no one knew what to say... it was like looking at a ghost. If they dared reach out, they feared he might vanish before their eyes.

"Luke..." Natalia finally began, breaking the tension. "Are- Are you truly alright?"

Luke smiled softly. "Yeah, I'm alright."

"You idiot!" Guy yelled, marching straight for the redhead. For a brief moment, Luke was expecting Guy to punch him, and he'd every intention of letting his best friend do so, but at the last minute Guy's shoulders sagged and the fire in him fizzled out. Instead his hands came to rest on Luke's shoulders, growing heavier as more and more of Guy's weight seemed to be supported by
this single gesture. "Do you have-" Guy choked back his feelings. "Do you have any idea how much you scared us? Don't ever do anything like that again! We are so- so-" Guy couldn't finish.

"I'm sorry for worrying you," Luke replied.

"I'm really glad you're alright, Luke, like... really glad you're okay but..." Anise interjected hesitantly. "But how are you alright? I mean, we all saw how hurt you were... I can't see how anyone could have survived something like that. Look at you..."

There was no denying Anise's statement. While Luke had mostly recovered physically, evidence of his drawn out battle with the Oracle Knights left traces all over his clothing. Where the fabric hadn't been torn, blood stained most of the blue outfit a dark brown colour. His once white jacket was painted almost entirely red and while some had been his opponents', much was his own. The remnants of his injuries could be seen from the tears in his clothing and there was no way to hide the long drawn scar across his abdomen where the sword had pierced him.

Luke ran his hand over the scar uncomfortably. "I don't know."

"What do you mean?" Tear asked.

"I really don't know," Luke answered again, this time his tone wavered betraying that he was as confused and uncertain as the rest of them. "I don't know how I survived... how I'm okay..."

"I don't blame you," Anise admitted. "Everything happened so fast, my head is still spinning. Between Asch freaking out and you getting better and Sync's trap exploding I don't have any clue what's going on!"

"I'm rather confused as well," Natalia confessed. "How did Luke even get here?"

"A hyperresonance, plain and simple," Jade said. "No different than the one that first transported Luke and Tear from the Fabre manor. Simply a different manifestation of it than we're accustomed to."

"Okay, so that explains why we didn't all go boom," Anise provided. "Thanks for that by the way, Asch," she snidely added. Asch scoffed and ignored her jab. "But that still doesn't explain how Luke managed to survive, or what happened to Sync's trap for that matter."

"Really, you needn't worry about it quite so much," Jade stepped up. "What other explanation is there?"

"Is Lorelei always your explanation for anything you can't understand?" Guy asked tauntingly.

Jade smirked but shrugged off the accusation. "I don't suppose we'll ever know for certain, though you can't deny those two have a rather intimate connection with the being and given Asch's state of mind at the time, we can be assured he isn't the one responsible." Asch folded his arms across his chest, pretending to ignore the statement outright.

"As for the latter..." Jade continued, looking at the twins expectantly. "Boys? Care to enlighten us?"

"Wait? You two did that?" Anise asked incredulously. "How did you pull that off?"

"No idea," Asch shrugged. "We just kind of... reacted."

"But you used your power, yes?" Jade asked.
"Kind of," Luke replied. "It was different though, I don't really know what we did either," he admitted sheepishly. "It just seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Like Asch said, we just kind of reacted."

"A second-order hyperresonance," Jade mused. "You combined the power of your respective hyperresonance to create a power that can nullify the effects of any active fonons. The degree of synchronization between hyperresonance necessary is such that it has never been observed before."

"That sounds handy," Anise commented. "You could pretty much nullify any arte or fonon-based power with something like that."

"It can be destructive in its own way, yes," Jade provided. "But if the synchronization between the two hyperresonance is even slightly off, it will fail and simply produce two separate first order hyperresonance. A double edged blade to be certain."

"Don't worry," Asch stated. "We're not planning on trying it again anytime soon."

"I certainly hope not," Jade replied, adjusting his glasses. Asch shot him a glare but didn't miss the look in his eyes. Leave it to Jade to remind him. The eldest redhead sighed, tuning out the conversation his companions carried on.

'Are you really okay?' Asch asked Luke privately.

'I'm getting better,' Luke answered. 'Still a little light-headed here and there, but between the Jewel and Tear's help I feel a lot better. By the time we get to Master Van I should at least be able to hold my own.'

'Are you sure? That whole ordeal took a lot out of you.'

'I could say the same thing about you,' Luke retorted and Asch should have known better than to think Luke hadn't noticed.

'I guess that's to be expected with how much of our power we used,' Asch said with a shrug. Luke smiled apologetically but Asch cut him off before he could utter a word. 'I wouldn't have it any other way.'

Together.

"If the two of you are done over there," Jade interrupted. "We'd best be moving on before Sync decides to come after us with the weapon Asch so conveniently left with him."

"He's not getting up for hours and you know it old man," Asch shot back.

"It's only Master Van left now," Luke commented.

"Yeah, and he's not very far."

"How do you know that?" Natalia asked her fiancé.

"It's faint, but I can sense Lorelei up ahead," Asch replied.

"If it's faint, doesn't that mean he's further away?" Anise inquired.

"No," Luke provided. "It's faint because Lorelei is dangerously weak right now. We don't have much time left."
"We can't let Lorelei perish," Tear spoke up. "If Lorelei dies, the world will try to restore the lost Seventh Fonons, destroying its own balance in the process. We came here to make sure that doesn't happen. We came to stop my brother and to ensure his world of replicas doesn't come to pass."

"Yeah," Anise agreed. "Besides, it's way too irresponsible to just erase everything and start over! We're not going to let him destroy what everyone has worked so hard to build! Ion believed in this world and that it could be a better place, and I will live to see that happen!"

"It's time we go put an end to Van, once and for all," Jade stated.

"You make it sound so simple, old man," Asch said.

"It is simple," Jade replied. "He believes the future is set in stone and wants to erase it, we believe it is but one of many possibilities. We've come to a point where we're unlikely to settle things with words alone."

"I'm not going to give up," Luke insisted. "The future can change, I believe that and I want Master Van to be able to see that too. I want to show him how we can change, our resolve to build a better world on the foundations of this one!"

"You've finally figured out how to carry the lives that have been consumed," Guy said with a smile. "As mean as this may sound, you have to keep on living. Keep living, keep growing and we'll all be here next to you to help carry the burdens along the way."

"That's right!" Anise piped up, echoed by an agreement from everyone else.

"We've come this far together," Asch said, placing a hand on Luke's shoulder. Luke looked back at his brother, a flicker of sorrow passing through his eyes before giving way to resolve and hope.

"Yeah," Luke agreed, his old energy flooding his face and determined smile. "It's time we finish this once and for all!"
Silence dominated the entire rooftop; creeping between each pillar along the perimeter before sweeping across the empty marble platform and into the fading sky, it completely enveloped former Commandant Van Grants. Even the wind succumbed to its enrapture and the world about him was completely still. Alone above the island of Eldrant, he sat on the unforgiving stone surface, awaiting his foes. From his timeless pedestal he had watched events unfold, followed a world on its final stretches: the last legs of a destiny he would unravel by his own hand. His soldiers had all fallen, his God-Generals met their fated ends; he alone remained to defend the future. He and the silence that served as his companion.

Van sensed his opponents long before their footsteps revealed their presence. He felt them approach, a sensation that he once could not perceive but now stood out from the encompassing emptiness. Each step that closed the gap between them was like a pulse that coursed through him, growing stronger with each second destiny grew closer. Next to him, his sword stood plunged into the ground, cutting through the golden sky and gleaming with the hints of red that slowly painted themselves across the horizon. It was a fitting colour; tonight he would deliver the final blow to this cursed world. Tonight he would strike down the last barrier to his success and the sky could continue to bleed until the last of Yulia's curse finally vanished.

Pulling himself to his feet, Van allowed the approaching footsteps to resonate across his ears, piercing the silence enclosing him. Each stride echoed, opening the curtain to the closing act. Salvation or destruction? The final decision would be carved with their blades upon the heart of the world.

Luke could feel his stomach churn as he climbed the stairs. True some of the nausea was left over from the injury that had nearly claimed his life, but more than anything Luke felt the weight of everything they were about to undertake sit uncomfortably in his gut. Were they really ready for this? Were they ready to face Master Van and juggle the fate of the world in their hands? Luke didn't know the answer, but there was one thing of which he was certain: whether they were ready or not was irrelevant. They would stand against Master Van and his replica world and they had no choice but to win. Luke just hoped that the process could somehow spare his former instructor. Why couldn't Master Van accept that the future could change? There had to be some way to convince him to change his mind. Luke wasn't going to give up without trying one last time.

The last step finally passed beneath his feet and Luke caught a glimpse of their battlefield. The roof of the temple spread out unimpeded, save for a tall pillar that stood at each corner. Beyond them all of Eldrant seemed to open out, painting a lifeless tableau against the setting sun. A grim preview of what future awaited the world should they fail.

It wasn't this that had captured Luke's attention, in fact, the sight hardly registered. Every ounce of his attention was focused on the man who stood in the center of the roof, staring them down. In this moment Luke suddenly realized that he hadn't seen his former instructor since his fall at the Absorption Gate. The man that stood before him was a shadow of the person Luke remembered, changed almost beyond recognition. His once neatly bound hair now flew free, falling past his shoulders and framing his hard blue eyes. His Oracle Knight uniform had all but vanished, save for the tan shirt he still wore over his black trousers and old boots. Both his arms were bound by bandages but small breaks in them revealed discoloured skin that shone a deep mauve in some places and pure black in others. Containing Lorelei had warped him, strained his body beyond repair. It was only in his face that Luke found familiar features. Though harsher than what he'd
become accustomed to in his youth, Van's blue eyes still shone behind his heavy brows and his tan goatee set below his pursed lips.

"You made it," Van spoke, its familiar deep tones ringing with the faintest hint of surprise. His eyes passed from Asch to Luke then back again, gauging them both. "Though perhaps some with closer calls then others," he added noting the blood that still clung to their clothing.

"Tch," Asch's hand flew to the Sword of Lorelei in a heartbeat.

"I'm impressed," Van's voice cut Asch's motion in its tracks. "I didn't think you would make it all this way, much less together. I was certain that bond of yours would never last, but perhaps I underestimated your will. You've finally made it all the way here to me. Now come, help me eliminate the Planet's Memory once and for all."


"I should have expected as much," Van said with sigh, lowering the hand he had extended to the boys. "After all these years, Asch, do you still reject me because of that replica?"

"No," Asch answered. "Regardless of what happened, or didn't happen with Luke, regardless of what path life had taken me down, I never would have helped you. What you're doing is wrong! No matter how you tried to blind me, I would never have agreed to this lunacy!"

"Perhaps I was the one who was wrong," Van admitted. "I was wrong to believe that you had what it takes, that you had the strength to do what needed to be done. You're too soft to make the necessary sacrifices to save the world. The only path that remains for this world is the final judgement of the Planet's Memory."

"That's not true!" Tear interjected. Van had to understand, there had to be some way for her to make him see. "The Score Yulia read is only one of many possible futures. Nothing is set in stone; it isn't the planet that decides, it's the people! They have the power to change, to make their own choices and carve their own place in the world!"

"People believe they are choosing of their own free will, but there is always the possibility that their decision was pre-determined," Van pointed out. "They are simply under the guise that the path they follow is of their own making. It was decided for them long before they were born."

"If that was true then your decision to destroy the Score is also pre-determined," Guy argued. "That would mean your plan follows the Planet's Memory too!"

"That argument is meaningless," Van returned. "Whether it is by design or not, once I have destroyed Lorelei, the Planet's Memory will be no more. Then the new world will be allowed to survive."

"I expected more from a man as intelligent as yourself," Jade stated simply. "All things will fade and die in time. This is an inevitable fact of life, one that will not change no matter how you struggle. At the very least people have the right to choose their own path to destruction."

"And I should expect as much from a Necromancer." Van's hard eyes challenged Jade and the clash of wills sent energy roiling across the battlefield. "Still, whether anyone desires it or not, whether the planet itself wants to or not, it is bound to follow its Memory so long as such a thing still exists. I will wipe this slate clean and allow for a truly new future. As it is now... the world has no alternative."

"You're wrong," Luke argued. "We believe that the future is one of infinite choices, one that only
we can decide on for ourselves... and we're willing to make that gamble."

"As I expected," Van stated with a mild sigh. "It seems we simply can't see eye to eye. I shouldn't be surprised that it has come to this."

"Please Master Van," the younger redhead pleaded. "I know things don't always turn out how we hope they will, and I know that there are times we want to believe that there was no other way than for things to have happened as they did. It's easier to believe that things are pre-determined than to accept that our choices have led us down the paths we're on, to do the things we've done... but it's because we make mistakes that we can make better choices next time. It's because the possibilities for the future are endless that we can dream for tomorrow. You asked me before, but this time I'm the one asking you: please join us! Let us show you that the future isn't set in stone!"

"And here I thought you might have finally rid yourself of that pitiful naivety," Van replied. "The world will not change, the future will not change. I refuse."

All the tension in Luke's posture melted, the desperate energy melting away to a solid will as a fire sparked within him. Drawing his sword, Luke pointed it at Van, all of his energy coursing through the weapon, mustering his determination at the tip that sliced through the air. "If that's the case," Luke said, his tone unwavering. "Then we will face you with everything we have."

"Oh?" Van spoke, intrigue in his voice. "You're rather quick to concede your ideals."

"No, I will not give up on the things I believe," Luke fired back. "I will accept that you are no different than we are, and that like us, you can't concede your ideals either. Neither of us will give up on what we think is right, what we know to be necessary for the future of this world... that's why we've come to this point."

"Strong words, but you may very well be fighting to protect an empty future. Your path could easily be the wrong one."

"Maybe so," Asch replied, standing next to his sibling. "It could be that the path we're on is one of destruction, but then again, maybe it isn't. That's the point; we don't know what the future will bring. Our path may be the wrong one, but it's still the one we've chosen for ourselves!"

"Then come!" Van shouted, grabbing the sword that still sat plunged into the stone roof. "Destroy me for that future of yours!"

The power rolled from the former Commandant, and even as Asch charged in he could feel the raw will coming from Van. When his first strike was met, the ice in Van's eyes pierced him with the startling realization that until this point, he had never really fought Van seriously. Even their previous battle was nothing by comparison. The weight behind Van's strikes, the fluidity with which he moved, countering each person as they attacked in turn, leaving not so much as the whisper of an opening left Asch without any doubts that they would be facing Van at his fullest strength... and that it was not going to be an easy fight.

Asch unleashed a flurry of strikes, each effortlessly parried by his foe, but the redhead refused to let up the pressure. He could see the amusement in Van's eyes and it only drove him onward. He wasn't going to let Van toy with him, play him like he knew his instructor always had. This time was different and he was strong enough to stand on his own. Feinting left, Asch swung his blade down on Van but was blocked with ease.

"Who do you think taught you the sword?" Van taunted. "Do you really think you stand a chance at defeating me?"
Asch's eyes narrowed and the fire in them doubled. "I don't have to," he replied.

The young monarch tried to break through but Van countered, throwing the boy off-balance. A quick sweep of his blade from the left all but disarmed Asch and Van continued his assault. He found Asch staring him down, but making no move in his defence.

Resistance exploded against Van's blade and Guy's sword barely halted Van's attack. Breaking through the brief opening, Asch lunged forward, his sword grazing its target as the former Commandant leapt backwards, distancing himself from the pair.

"You've grown weak," Van spat, sidestepping the arte that Jade loosed against him. The icicles rained to the ground, shattering harmlessly against the stone. "You can't even defend yourself; I'm disappointed. I expected greater things from you, Asch."

"It's not weakness," Asch fired back, readying his blade. "It's trust. I'm not up here fighting alone; I have friends that I know will watch my back and compensate for my weaknesses. That's why I don't have to surpass you on my own, together we will defeat you."

"You're a fool."

"No Vandesdelca," Guy finally replied. "You're the fool. You're the one who has abandoned the world and everyone in it. You're the one who gave up on the people important to you!"

Guy charged his former attendant, supported by Asch and Luke, who joined him on either side. Behind them Jade and Anise were providing an array of offensive artes while Tear and Natalia both offered supporting ones, all while keeping everyone free of injury. Despite what should be overwhelming odds in their favour, Van was too quick and too experienced to fall for any of their usual tactics. Natalia's arrows met nothing but air, and if Jade's artes landed, it was usually dangerously close to his allies, rather than his foe. Van had long since mastered directing the flow of battle and he used their numbers against them. They had to watch out for each other as much as they had to watch out for his attacks.

Those attacks were nothing to scoff at either and each hit was draining the blond. That Van had yet to use any artes of his own was starting to worry Guy. Van was conserving his energy, biding his time while they mounted their fruitless offensive. If this kept up, they would be too exhausted to fend off Van's offensive when it came. They had to find a way around his defence, another opening in his carefully guarded wall that they could slip through. One chance, that's all he needed!

Switching from her artes Anise jumped in the fray. With one of Jade's fonic artes running toe to toe with Tokunaga, she lunged at Van only to meet nothing but air. She swerved to the right, nearly falling from her doll's back as she dodged his counter strike. The wind from the sword sent a chill down her spine but she had little time to shake off the feeling before being forced back again. Taking advantage of her retreat, her foe chased her down, leaving her more unstable with each hit he dodged. Trying to escape to the left, Anise was cut off by Van who knocked Tokunaga out from under her, his blade swinging mercilessly down on the now defenceless girl.

Asch's sword met his attack, the power of the strike resonating down the defending weapon and paralyzing its wielder for just long enough. In a swift motion Van's free hand met his student's gut and the air flew from Asch's lungs. Guy dove into the fray, throwing Van's ensuing strike off course from its target, in a single clean hit. Swinging around with his sheathe, Guy forced Van to leap backwards and away from his recovering comrades. Desperate to ensure his friend's safety, Guy went on the offensive, determined to occupy Van's attention as Natalia rushed in to aid the fallen pair.
"Sacrifices are necessary to create a new world," Van stated, facing down his childhood friend. "There can be no birth without death, no creation without destruction. If you cannot accept that, then you will never find a future for the world."

"Is that all anyone is to you?" Guy demanded. "Is that all that Cantabile's friendship... that Legretta's love ever amounted to? Just another sacrifice for this so called world of yours?"

"They were prepared for their fate the day they agreed to follow me," Van answered, as pitiless as the attack Guy hastened to dodge. "They acknowledged and accepted this outcome from the very beginning." Swinging his sheath around, Van sidestepped Guy's attack, opening himself to the blade that followed it. Van was faster than Guy gave him credit for and his strike grazed the man's side.

"How do you expect to build a new world on feelings like that?" Guy asked. "Your sword is one that was born to protect, Vandesdelca, not one meant for destruction. If you truly believe those things... then you've no right to wield it any longer."

"I've no need of your approval, you are no longer my liege-lord," he retorted, quickly parrying Guy's strike and forcing the blond on the defensive.

"No I'm not," Guy acknowledged. "But I'd hoped you might still count me your friend, someone whose words were worthy of consideration at the very least."

"The destruction of the Planet's Memory is all that matters," Van's icy voice sliced through the blond's words. "So long as the world is freed from Yulia's curse, there's no need to be concerned for anything else."

"Then as one who still considers you a friend, I will put an end to this madness," Guy fired alongside his offensive.

His foot rasped across the marble, bringing Guy up short as he ducked under Van's swing. Before the man had time to adjust, Guy slipped behind his defences. Too close for his sword to connect, Guy's sheath collided with Van's chin sending him reeling back a few paces. Guy swung his blade around, but Van had already recovered and was waiting for the blow.

Van's counter was intercepted by Luke and Guy took advantage of the opening to strike back. Jade launched an arte but the spikes that rose from the earth simply gave Van a platform from which to stage his retaliation. Luke met his assault, deflecting the weight of the blow and throwing his instructor off balance. Recovering even faster than before, Van's second attack came flying at his head but Luke ducked and struck back. Van defended but the parry was too weak and Luke threw him open, forcing Van to jump back to avoid the strike.

Van was surprised when the hesitancy in Luke's strike hadn't come and the fire in his foes eyes left the former Commandant to wonder where the weak replica that had once clung to his heels had gone. It was a question he was left to ponder as he continued to defend against his student's ensuing assault. Luke's style had changed somewhat, mingled with another's while under different tutelage and in many ways his swordsmanship was more refined than even his original's. The replica he had so quickly written off had grown into something more than he had ever intended.

Refined or not, he was still a mere replica, a failed creation that had impeded Van every step of the way and though he had proven he had skill, he wasn't a match for Van. Luke's muscles tensed, betraying the power behind the next strike. Ready for the force his student had somehow harnessed, Van readied his defence. Enough was enough and this mistake of his ended now.
Luke's blade ducked around the back, assaulting from the opposite side as he redirected his attack. Caught off guard by the feint, Van's resulting block was weak and Luke broke through his guard. Lunging forward, Luke was thrown off balance when his strike was dodged and the retaliating arte sent the young noble skidding across the ground.

"Still as readable as ever," Van stated, readying his blade anew. "You always did broadcast your intentions for the world to see. Here I was thinking you might have actually scraped together some talent."

"I don't care what you think of me," Luke replied, spitting the blood from his mouth. "I don't need your acknowledgement anymore. I have more than enough reasons to live and to build a future for myself. So whether you think I have talent or not, whether you think I'm Asch's equal or not, I'm done letting you or anyone else decide my value. No one will decide my worth but me."

"I think we've dragged this out long enough," Jade announced, his blast forcing Van away from Luke and drawing the man's attention. Drawing his spear, Jade met Van's attack blow for blow, dancing around the man who chased him down. Truly Van wasn't an opponent to be underestimated, but Jade hadn't mounted such a fruitless offensive without purpose. Each attack, each strike confirmed what he suspected, and what he was sure Luke and Asch had picked up on already. Seventh fonons seeped from the commandant with each hit; Lorelei's power was slowly leaking from him as the battle drew on. "Don't you think it's about time you concede defeat?" The Colonel asked.

"Don't begin with me Necromancer," Van retorted. "You're a fool if you think I'm on my last legs. I'm just getting started."

"That is irrelevant," Jade stated, striking forward and forcing Van back, narrowly dodging the arte that ensued. "You have no way of destroying Lorelei without Luke and Asch's hyperresonance, that's why you've kept them alive this whole time, is it not? Neither intends to cooperate with you, so you have no way of advancing your plans. You've already lost." An evil grin spread across Van's face.

"That's why I called you a fool!"

In a split second, the power that had been meaninglessly seeping from Van converged on the man and the recoil swept across the battlefield nearly knocking Asch from his feet. Damn it! What had just happened? All the fonons were suddenly focused, channelled through their opponent whose increase in strength was so intense that Asch could feel it. Just what the hell had Van just done?

"I no longer need your power to destroy Lorelei," Van stated plainly, a wave of fonons blasted across the field as he swung his sword through the empty air. "You've arrived too late: Lorelei is already dead. His thoughts, his will are no more, he is nothing but an expendable power for me to use at will."

'This is... Lorelei's power?' Luke asked.

'What else could it be? As much as I hate to think he's actually using it... you can tell too right?'

'Yeah... This isn't going to be easy.'

'No one ever said it would be,' Asch answered.

"You think that's enough to scare us off?" Asch taunted. "You're slipping if you think the light show is going to make us surrender."
"You're the ones who are slipping. There is no longer any chance of victory for you, you are simply too foolish to see it."

"I told you before," Asch shouted as he charged Van. "I'm not giving up!"

"Oh?" Van easily parried Asch's attacks, but the boy was unusually persistent; less put off then such toying typically left him. "And just what do you intend to do?"

"Well I'm going to start by killing you and seeing how that works," the redhead fired with a surprisingly level headed air about him. "Then I'll go from there!"

Van sidestepped Asch's attack, throwing the noble sideways. His knee came up, but Asch was quicker the second time, throwing his weight to the side and crashing to the ground rather than take the hit. Rolling a few paces he flew back up to his feet as Van's voice filled the air.

In a split second Asch found himself back on the ground, this time pinned under Luke's weight as a blast of Seventh fonons erupted from the earth where he'd just stood. The pillars erupted all around them, painting the battlefield as they raced to the heavens.

"Careful," Luke's voice was barely a whisper in Asch's ear. "Master Van knows all the Fonic hymns, just like Tear does."

Damn, Asch cursed under his breath, sparing a second to ensure no one had taken a hit from the arte that had just torn through them. He'd forgotten that fact, if he'd ever actually known it. Asch realized he still knew so little about the man they fought. As much as he'd like to deny it, Van's existence had profoundly and inexorably influenced his own, and yet he knew next to nothing about him. For better or for worse, it was thanks to this man that he had found himself on the path he walked today, so why did he not understand what made Van tick?

Deep down, Asch knew the answer, and like so many other things, it stemmed back to the frightened child he had been for so long. At first he'd been too young, too focused on the comfortable shell in which he'd lived his life to consider the circumstances of his new instructor. Then the kidnapping had occurred. At first he'd been scared, uncertain and ultimately afraid of finding out why Van had done the things he'd done. By the time Akzeriuth had rolled around it was too late for any of that to matter anymore. He understood Van's past, seen through his friends the agony Van had lived through but even then he hadn't stopped to try and understand any of it. Why was Van so completely devoted to building his replica world? Why was any other course of action unacceptable? What scars was Van trying to mend with this destruction... with his desperate need to have everything start over? Perhaps it was pointless to ponder such things now, and maybe it was too late for Asch's feelings to get through, but at the very least he wanted to try. He wanted to see the person beyond the radical ideas, beyond the cruel things he said and the crueler things he had done. They had started as student and teacher, now they faced each other as enemies... as equals, but whether it was by his design or not, Van had been the one to lead him to this place.

Asch wanted to see the person Luke still called 'Master.'

Van began to sing again, but Tear's voice mingled with Van's baritone and the melodist's brother was quick to jump aside as several blades of fonons converged on empty air, narrowly missing their mark. Wasting no time, Tear flew forward with a second arte that was met by Van's barrier. In the momentary opening, Van struck but Tear was prepared and she narrowly dodged it, the tip of her staff coming down on Van's arm. The skin hidden beneath the bandages resisted the attack and Tear was forced back several paces where Luke joined her assault.

Tear flew forward once more, putting all her feelings behind each strike. All the uncertainties she
had entertained along the way here were gone. Lost in the flurry of reactions, there was no hesitancy in her movements or regret in her heart. All this time she had been afraid, scared that when the time came she wouldn't be able to face her brother, to look him in the eye and put an end to his life. Now that she was here, now that she could look at him and see the satisfaction behind his neutral expression, she knew that she could face him. Van had chosen this path; and though he had done many terrible things along the way, he had poured his heart into making it here, into defending a future he earnestly believed in. As his sister, she would not insult him by giving him anything short of her all. She would show him the heart she had put into her future as well and let their battle decide the outcome.

His little sister continued to attack wordlessly, but the passion he found behind her attacks could have filled entire conversations. Gone were the reservations, the cold calculated movements that Van had once expected of her. So they continued to converse as strike after strike was exchanged, each blow painting the heart he found pinned on his sister's sleeve. Yet there was none of the weakness he expected from this development, none of the rash or foolish mistakes that such emotions entailed. Before him was a woman who had not only discovered her emotions, she had conquered them.

You've grown, Mysterica.

Tear was forced back several paces and Van retreated from the space between them where Jade's arte landed. Van swung his sword, sending with it a second wave of fonons that blew like a fierce wind, knocking Natalia's arrows out of the air and forcing the entire lot of them back. Tokunaga was tossed by the strike, sending Anise crashing into Guy and both fell hard on the stone beneath them. Tear retreated to tend to the injured duo.

'Looks like we're up,' Luke stated.

'Yeah,' Asch agreed. 'How about we show Van what this journey has really taught us?'

'You know I'm game for that,' Luke fired back, catching Asch's train of thought. 'Let's show him exactly what he's playing with.'

Luke was the first to intervene when Van tried to attack the injured pair and Asch was quick to provide backup for his replica. Van struck at Asch but was easily dodged. Feinting Van tried to catch his student off guard but Asch saw through his ruse and parried, allowing Luke to counter and force Van back. The former Commandant attacked with a blast of fonons but the pair had already slipped behind him. He swung around and forced them back but they were quickly back on the offensive.

Van retaliated, shattering his opponents' attempts with ease, but with each failed attack he grew increasingly curious. He'd credit his students, there was no denying they had talent, but the degree to which they were evading him was starting to be disconcerting. Why were they proving so hard to pin down? Every feint was predicted, each block was countered perfectly... there was no way they should know his style well enough to predict his moves on the level he was witnessing. They were reading him too well.

Swinging his sword forward, Van unleashed an unexpected arte mid-strike. The boys dodged in opposite directions, retaliating from each side and he stepped forward to escape their attack. How could they have anticipated-?

Of course, Van spun around knocking both boys back with a massive blast of fonons. Foolish of him to have overlooked such an obvious fact: it wasn't his style or swordsmanship they were reading. They could read the way he channelled Lorelei's power because that power was a twin to
their own. It simplified matters, really. If he was unable to fool them, then he simply had to crush them head on.

Searching deep within himself Van found the source of his power. Effortlessly he coaxed the fonons forth; there was no resistance to impede him, no struggle against his inevitable victory, simply a flawless obedience, what he'd expect from any fonon he summoned. The Seventh Fonons poured forth from within, flooding his body and melting into his extremities, swirling about him chaotically until the only thoughts that flooded his mind were the memories such a sensation invoked.

He was not the same pathetic young boy who had been forced into all those experiments years ago. In the aftermath of that horrific day, Van had sworn it would be the last time. The last time such power would be beyond his control, the last time it would be used for anything outside his own making. He would destroy each and every one of the fools who clung mindlessly to the Score and who revelled in the destruction it brought about. His revenge would come not just to them, but to the entire cruel existence that would force such a fate upon a child. Then over their corpses he would build a world where such things did not exist, that would not repeat the same foolish mistakes unto eternity. That had been his vow the day he had failed to protect those he loved and he would hold to it until there was no breath left in his body.

Van launched himself forward and Asch struggled under the weight of his attack. For a moment Van could have sworn his student took on a golden hue and he retreated as a multitude of the fonons he had summoned were all but dissipated. Asch cursed, barely able to put a dent in the mass for his attempt to reroute Lorelei's power. They couldn't just leave Van to abuse Lorelei that way! No, as it was they weren't equipped to do anything about it, but that was going to change right now! If Van wanted to play that way, then Asch had a few tricks up his sleeve too.

"Luke!" Asch called, launching the Sword of Lorelei into the air.

"Foolish boy!" Van sneered, heading Luke off, his eye never leaving the sword. He hadn't forgotten the ruse that had bested him the last time they'd crossed blades. It had caught him off guard then, but it was an easy tactic to intercept. "You didn't think that trick would work again this time, did you?"

"Of course not!" Asch shouted, the smug grin on his face sending Van's thoughts askance. From the corner of his eye, Van saw an object flash by him. A glance over his shoulder revealed the replica with just as much satisfaction painted across his face. Impossible! A feint?

Asch snatched the Jewel of Lorelei from the air, and with a leap caught the blade, he himself had launched.

'It's all up to you now,' Asch fired and was immediately flooded as Luke took control of his actions. It was a simpler technique than Asch thought it would be to break down the Jewel into its fonons, but one that he had never bothered to learn. Luke expertly tuned into their fon slots and unleashed the arte. The Jewel in Asch's hand shattered into a mass of glowing fonons that converged within the Sword's hilt. Both of them felt the Sword pulse, the Jewel reforming and locking into place creating the Key of Lorelei that hadn't existed since Yulia herself had held it.

Luke retreated, fighting the weariness that flooded him. Across from him he could see the Key glowing in Asch's hand and the satisfaction in that accomplishment alone gave him some energy back. Now they were ready. It was time to take Master Van down!

"You've figured out how to revive the Key, but it's of little use to you now," Van stated with enough satisfaction rattle Luke's burst of confidence. What did he mean? He'd tried all this time to
seize the Key... it must factor against him somehow.

"You expect us to believe that?" Anise asked sceptically, finally back on her feet. "After all the effort you put into chasing Asch down and trying to steal it, you really think we're going to believe it's not dangerous to your plans?"

"Believe what you will, it's of no consequence to me," Van replied.

"You're bluffing," Guy called.

"You're free to find out for yourself, if you can!"

Van attacked and this time Luke was ready for it. He parried the strike but still felt himself pinned under the massive force behind Van's attack. Guy jumped in but was quickly met by an arte that blasted him skyward. Righting himself midair, Guy landed on his feet but found himself on the defensive upon landing. Natalia fired a volley of arrows that did little save force the commandant to re-adjust his assault.

"What do you think, Jade?" Asch asked, stepping back from the fray for a moment, offering his support with artes alongside his older companion. He was rattled by Van's claims, and even more so by the power their opponent was suddenly putting out. He and Luke could barely get a grasp on the fonon flow anymore, there was just too much going on at once to single out any one arte from the hoards of others waiting in the wings. Even from a distance it was proving impossible to read. Van had seen through that tactic too. They had the Key now; they just needed some way to get through his defences!

"What concerns me more than his claims regarding the Key is the way he is so freely wielding Lorelei's power," Jade replied between castings. "How is it possible for him to harness such a large amount of power from Lorelei without encountering resistance from the being?"

"I told you, didn't I?" Van cut in, lunging for the Necromancer and halting his arte mid-cast. Jade easily sidestepped the strike and went on the offensive. "Lorelei is already dead."

"What do you mean by that?" Tear demanded.

"Lorelei is no more, his existence has vanished. All that remains is a mass of expendable fonons for me to command."

"Impossible!" Natalia insisted. There was no way that Lorelei could truly have perished. Surely Van was trying to sew confusion among them. If Lorelei were gone, then they had arrived too late! Then everything they had worked towards would all be for naught. Natalia refused to believe that all their hard work would lead them to an end like this!

"Do you finally understand what that means?" Van asked. "It is now impossible for your world to survive. There's no longer any way for you to win. Even if you defeat me, the world will destroy itself to try and compensate for the lost Seventh Fonons. That is why the Key is of no consequence to me anymore. There is no longer a Lorelei to free."


"Deny it all you will, but a replica world is the only way for this planet to have a future," Van insisted, his tone nothing short of malicious.

'No...’ Luke continued privately, barely mustering the concentration for such an effort before finding himself pinned under Van's assault. There was no mistaking the expression on his former
instructor's face. It was smug, relishing in a victory he was sure he'd finally attained. Why had Master Van reached that conclusion? 'He's wrong.'

Luke didn't harbour any doubts about that fact. As sure as he was still breathing, Lorelei was alive. He could still feel it; a familiar presence that existed at the back of his mind if he dug deep enough. It lingered quietly, so frail that a wisp of thought might sweep it away entirely, but the entity Luke had come to know was still there. They hadn't lost hope yet!

'Yeah,' Asch concurred. 'Lorelei may not have the strength to exert himself, or to resist what Van's doing to him, but he isn't gone completely. We still have a chance!'

Luke nodded in agreement. 'Then let's not waste it!'

Luke charged forward and Asch fell back, providing support with his artes. Jade could tell Asch knew none would hit, rather he focused on forcing Van into a position that would give Luke an opening. Seeing the boys' determination, Jade renewed his assault as well, and everyone followed suit. They might not know the particulars, but after coming this far they all trusted Luke and Asch's judgement in the matter. If they were still willing to fight, if they would continue to defy Van's plans for his replica world, then Jade, at the very least would continue to support them. Even if everything Van said was true, and they had lost their chance to preserve the future, as long as those two continued to fight, so would the rest of them. Though Jade doubted such was the case. Asch and Luke... they whose existence held the world in its grasp knew better than anyone Lorelei's fate, and it was not going to end at the hands of Van Grants.

Van was easily holding his own against all seven of them and that left Asch worried. It took Luke, Guy and Anise just to keep up with him in the fray, and that was with Natalia and Tear constantly focused on healing the injuries they were steadily incurring. His and Jade's artes took too long; by the time they were cast, Van knew what was coming and was clear of their trajectory. They didn't have the time for this! Lorelei may not be dead yet, but even he could tell the being was teetering dangerously on a precipice and if this kept up too much longer, Van really will have won.

What puzzled Asch was why Lorelei was in such a state. Sure he had been confined within Van, but that didn't differ from his captivity in the core by much. Lorelei may have worn himself out from fighting his captor, but this was beyond sheer weariness. It was beyond Van using up his power. Something else had happened that had consumed Lorelei's strength so drastically.

*You've arrived too late: Lorelei is already dead. His thoughts, his will are no more, he is nothing but an expendable power for me to use at will.*

Of course! The realization dawned on Asch that this was a recent development. After all, Van had set traps for them here in Eldrant, why bother doing such a thing if their presence didn't make a difference? No... it had happened very recently, in a moment that Asch would never be able to forget. Lorelei had been the one to save Luke. When Luke had been dying in his arms, it was Lorelei that brought him back from the edge. Lorelei had healed his wounds and guided Luke back to them. In exchange it was Lorelei who had taken Luke's place on the precipice. He had exhausted all the strength that he had left, leaving him in a state where he had no choice but to submit completely to Van's whims and commands. He had almost sacrificed his very existence to spare Asch's little brother. But why?

If Lorelei was so desperate to save Luke, there must have been some kind of purpose. There must be some reason that it was critical for Luke to survive, no matter the cost. Could it be... Luke was the one that needed to free Lorelei? Asch didn't need to think on it long; he realized that he had already known the answer. It had to be Luke. Luke who was born outside of the Score's confines, who was born into a world of endless possibilities... he had to be the one to open the door to the
Finally understanding what needed to be done, Asch returned to the fray. Running alongside Jade's arte, he hurled himself at his former instructor. Anticipating Van's dodge, the redhead landed on the stone ground and swung around, sweeping with the blade that forced his foe back another several paces. Asch shifted his weight and threw himself at the retreating commandant. The Key bathed in the light of the familiar fonons, slicing through Van's barrier like water and leaving a gash in the man's shoulder. Van stumbled back a pace but recoiled faster than Asch could have anticipated with an arte that left him scrambling to evade.

"Asch!"

Luke jumped in, deflecting the shot intended for his sibling. He fought back Van's assault, able to keep up with the man whose injured shoulder had slowed him just enough. Flowing with the momentum of battle, Luke thought only of pushing Van back, each step was another small victory, as long as he could continue, as long as he could keep moving forward he knew that no matter how insurmountable the odds were, they would eventually get through. They were so close Luke could feel it! He wasn't going to let their hopes and dreams slip through his fingers now!

Luke felt the fonons begin to swirl about but paid them no mind, there were so many Seventh Fonons abound from Van's manipulation of Lorelei that to try and make sense of them took too much concentration away from what he was doing. Van countered with an upswing and Luke spotted his opening. The arte came out of nowhere and Luke hastened to get out of its path, the process of shifting his momentum threw the young noble dangerously open. An evil grin swept across Van's face.

"Watch out!"

Luke found himself flung to the ground, protected by the silhouette of his sibling that now overshadowed him. Several drops of blood hit the marble surface next to him.

"Asch! Are you-"


"Asch what are you-?"

"It's your turn Luke," Asch stated simply. His free hand slipped the Key of Lorelei into his brother's, and closed Luke's fingers around it. "It's your turn to show Van the world you dream of. Show him a future filled with endless possibilities."

"But- But you're-" Luke's voice shook as he watched more blood spill onto the marble below.

"Relax, I told you, I'll live," Asch answered, flinching as the cut across his back insisted on reminding him of its presence. "We're finishing this together, right?"

"Right," Luke answered, determination painting the smile across his face.

Standing up, Luke swung the Key of Lorelei through the air, bringing it to a tight stop as the air behind it whipped in pursuit. The blade moulded to his hand, responding to his slightest whim. It power radiated up into Luke, feeding the fire that spilled out from him and in exchange Luke fed the sword his feelings. He wanted to protect everyone... but in reality that didn't even begin to cover how he felt. Right here, right now, staring his destiny eye to eye, Luke realized he wanted so much more. Everyone who had ever helped him, everyone who had ever offered him a hand back up when he'd fallen, he wanted to show them all that he had the strength to make their efforts, their
sacrifice worthwhile. For those that they'd lost, and those that continued living, Luke wanted a world worthy of their legacy. He wanted to carve a place where people could be happy, where everyone he loved could continue to smile and laugh as they built a future that was all their own. He wanted to protect not only his friends, not only his family but all the possibilities that their lives would entail. Yes, this was the blade that would answer his dreams, it would carry his burdens and carve his hopes onto the very fabric of the world itself.

Asch stood up, but the pain radiated up through his shoulders from where Van's sword had landed. The wound was deeper than he given it credit for and he could feel the blood running down his back. Gripping Luke's sword in his hand, Asch willed the pain away. He wasn't going to let Luke carry this fate alone. Taking a step forward, every muscle spasmed in protest and overwhelmed, Asch dropped to one knee.

"Asch!" Natalia ran to her fiancé's side. Her heart set itself racing when her hands met his coat, already wet with the blood he was losing.

"Same weakness for your replica as always," Van commented, disappointed lingering in the depths of his voice. "You consistently fail to see the bigger picture wherever he's concerned. You've let yourself be blinded."

"Shut it," Asch spat, flinching as Natalia attempted to reach the gash. "I don't want to hear anything from you about being blinded."

"Have it your way," Van replied, his voice sent ice crawling down Luke's back. Shaking off the sensation with a shudder, Luke barely had time to contemplate the dangerous energy radiating from his opponent. Arm raised, Van's sword struck down towards the undefended couple and Luke's blade arrived just in time to parry the hit. Van's empty fist collided with Luke's arm, throwing the youngest noble aside. Unable to react in time, Asch and Natalia took Van's following arte head on and the pair went skidding across the marble surface, leaving a trail of blood in their wake.

"Damn it!" Luke cursed, charging Van before the man could follow up on his assault. From the corner of his eye he could see Natalia and Asch move, though their movements were obviously pained. They were down but not out; Luke barely had the chance to let out the breath he'd been holding before he found himself on the defensive again. Struggling to keep up with Van's assault, he spared his full attention just long enough to see Tear safely reach the fallen couple. She'd get them fixed up; Luke just had to buy her some time!

The Key of Lorelei in hand and with Guy and Anise at his sides, Luke turned his attention to forcing Van back. Enthralled in a world of action and reaction, Luke let his instincts govern his movements as his hits flowed from one to the next. Luke honed in on his opponent, following him when Guy or Anise's attack pushed him in one direction or another. He wasn't going to let Master Van hurt anyone he cared about ever again. This was their journey, their fight and if it took everything Luke had he would see it through until the end!

The Key of Lorelei pushed forward and Van's barrier melted beneath it. Luke felt his hit connect; the mass of Seventh Fonons tied together by Yulia's hymn was no match for Lorelei's blade, proof poured in the form of the blood that seeped into the fraying bandages around Van's arm. Though stitched within seconds by the fonons that ran rampant within Van, the stain betrayed the strike. Slightly dishevelled from the hit, Van's ensuing strike sent Guy reeling and Luke picked up the slack countering with a will on par with his foe's. Their clashing swords rang across the empty air, singing a requiem upon the empty island below.

With every attack that connected to Van's, Luke felt a pulse, as if his heart beat in time to the Key's
strikes. Each pulse flooded Luke with heat, gentle and warm at first, it slowly intensified until Luke could distinctly feel each clash between him and Van. What was going on? He knew the feeling that stirred with each hit. It was one with which he had become so intimately familiar it was impossible to ignore. What was Lorelei suddenly reacting to?

Tear's gentle voice filled the air, and Luke instantly recognized the 4th hymn. Its healing effect spread out like the glyph that lit the ground and while it was focused on Asch and Natalia, Luke felt his own energy returning. Gathering the newfound strength that flooded him, Luke threw everything, his heart, his dreams and each and every one of his friends' wills behind his attack. Anticipating the assault, Van raised his sword to block.

The second their blades met, Luke felt his entire body resonate along with the Key of Lorelei in his hands. Van leapt back in surprise, which was more than enough for Luke to confirm his suspicions. This was unlike anything that had happened until this point: Luke had very distinctly felt Lorelei stir. Even Asch's mind had sharpened, alerted to the sensation they had both experienced. Luke stared at his blade, the Jewel still pulsing at the heart of the sword in which it lay, still beating in time with his –no- with **Lorelei's** heart. Silence swept across the battlefield, and the pulse deadened. Luke attacked again, but the sensation did not repeat, and despite his efforts, he felt Lorelei slip away once again.

Why? Luke mustered all the attention he could spare from his battle with Van to ponder the strange occurrence. They had gotten a response from Lorelei, but how? What had separated that one strike from the countless others that still rang a steady beat throughout the Key. What had dragged the dying creature back from the brink, even for just that brief second?


Of course! Luke swung widely, forcing Van to leap backwards to dodge the swing and ensuing arte. It was the Key that had been calling out to Lorelei. The Key of Lorelei was part of the pact between him and Yulia, he had no choice but to answer to it. The beating he felt was Lorelei being forced to respond, but only barely. It wasn't enough by itself. Luke needed the other half of that pact. He needed-

"Tear!" Luke called out. "You need to sing the Grand Fonic Hymn!"

Tear looked up from her charges just long enough to meet Luke's eyes before he was under her brother's assault again. The Grand Fonic Hymn, at a time like this? Asch and Natalia were both still injured, and her brother's attacks didn't show any signs of letting up. Besides, she had never sung the entire hymn before, and she couldn't be certain she truly understood the meaning of the final piece.

"You can do it," Asch's voice cut through her concerns, and she turned to see him helping Natalia to her feet. They weren't fully healed by any stretch of the imagination, and she was prepared to say as much when Asch began speaking again. "We both know you can do it... you **have** to do it."

There was a light behind Asch's eyes, an eagerness and determination that weighed heavily on the words he spoke to her. She could feel it in his voice, in the way his words were an aching reflection of his younger siblings'; she **had** to do this, and this was something only she could do. After so many months of chasing her brother, of vowing to make sure his twisted world would never come to fruition, she had finally reached this moment of truth, and she wasn't going to give up now.

Standing with her staff firmly in hand, Tear took a deep breath to settle any remaining doubts that lingered in her mind. Had Yulia been uncertain when she had created the Score? Had she doubted what was right and what was wrong? Or had she simply ploughed ahead with the support of her
friends, trusting in those who would inherit her world to take care of it? With one last sigh Tear dismissed the last of her doubts. Yulia had passed her hymns, passed the world that she loved onto Tear, and the melodist knew exactly what she—what they both—wanted for it.

Tear's voice rose above the sounds of battle, her song drowning them out until the fonic hymns were all anyone heard. The familiar melody ensnared them all, its power cutting their breath short. There was a weight to the words, a force behind the harmonics that left no one untouched by its enrapture.

"Your efforts are in vein," Van declared, leaving no pause in his assault. "The hymns will do you no more good than the Key of Lorelei did."

"Do you really believe that?" Luke asked, flying toe to toe with Van as they danced across the battlefield that sparked alight with the power of Tear's hymn. He felt its power, its strength coursing through him, with each word that wrapped itself around the combatants. "Do really believe this is all for nothing or are you just pretending not to feel it?"

The Key of Lorelei traced a golden arc through the air as Tear flowed flawlessly from the 4th to the 5th hymn, her voice picking up as the melody intensified. Coming down on Van's sword Luke felt every fibre in him resonate, ringing in time with the song that flowed through him. "Tell me Master Van!" Luke demanded, the glow of the Key spreading to encompass its wielder. "Can you really not feel our will? From all the destruction that the Score promises, we were able to find hope! We were able to discover a path that doesn't mean sacrificing everything, that builds a better world on the one we have! Can't you see those dreams? The hopes of every single person on Auldrant have all gathered right here, right now!"

The 6th hymn reached its peak and Tear effortlessly slipped into the final verse. The song ensnared Van, each lyric curled itself around his limbs, melting into them until his every extremity was leaden. Pinned under Luke's attack, the golden aura that enveloped his student flooded from his sword, encompassing Van as well and he felt a familiar stirring. The waking of a conflicting will deep within ripped his focus in half as he fought to maintain control of the storm of fonons that no longer so readily obeyed him. Never. He would never give in—never allow Lorelei to run free. Their future was a lie, the hopes of ones who were too weak to do what needed to be done, he could never let it come to pass... no matter the cost, no matter the sacrifice. They were too weak... too naive... he would show them how feeble their ideals were. He would crush them, shatter the Key of Lorelei and claim his victory.

Weak are they?

Van fought to move his unresponsive arms but every motion he made was countered by an equal force that pulled him back. Each nerve in his body seared in protest, the movement he commanded refused, his will clashing against the power that ran rampant throughout him. Throwing Luke back should be nothing! Why could he not muster the strength?

You can never overcome him. You who have been trapped by Yulia's Score could never fathom the will, the resolve that they possess. Their potential has surpassed the Planet's Memory, their dreams have broken through those shackles. They have discovered the future.

Can you not feel it?

Van's eyes widened as they connected with Luke's. Reflecting the golden aura surrounding the two combatants, they seemed to burn with determination, but within Van saw a flicker of regret. Naive to the very end... Van smiled. Luke drew his sword back.
"If you've lost even that..." Luke said, hesitating for a split second in which Van knew he saw sorrow cast its shadow across his face. "Then it ends here!"

Luke's sword lurched as it pierced through Van's chest, sending a torrent of blood spilling out onto the marble surface beneath them. Still leaning in, Luke felt his teacher's weight as it fell forward, regret pouring over him with that single sensation. He wouldn't feel sorry; Luke wouldn't insult Master Van that way. Instead he let those feeling escape on the breath he let out.

"Master Van... thank you."

Ripping his sword from their foe, Luke watched Master Van fall to his knees, his fatal injury still pouring what life remained out onto the battlefield. Tear's voice died and silence swept across the platform; only the wind dared move.

"The final hymn," Van's deep tones carved through the silence. "You remembered it."

"I remember," Tear answered, swallowing the lump that sat like lead in her throat. "You sang it to me when I cried. You knew what it meant, what Yulia wanted for the world... and you were telling me right from the beginning."

"Master Van!" Asch ran several paces until he stood at Tear's side. "Thank you."

"Foolish boys." Van coughed. "You would both still call me Master?"

"Of course," Luke replied, smiling as he stood beside his sibling.

"It's thanks to you that we're here today," Asch continued. "You guided us to this path, forced us to rethink what we believed and discover a new future. Is that not what a teacher does?"

Van sighed, unable to hold back the smile that pulled at his lips. "Naive... to the very... end." His voice came out strained, struggling to hold onto the last of his life as he slouched over and fell to the ground. "Surely... I taught you better... than... that..."

"Van!" Tear called out, water leaking down her cheeks.

"Farewell..." his whisper floated on the wind to his little sister's ears. "Mystearica..."

"Goodbye... brother."

Tear took a deep breath, wiping the water from her eyes. They weren't done yet... she could sort through her feeling later, properly put her brother's memory to rest once everything was finished. Besides... he had been satisfied; Tear didn't doubt that. Perhaps... this was what he had wanted from the beginning, that she would overturn the Score, just like the lullabies he had sung to her so long ago. The melodist let one last tear slip down her cheek.

The silence lingered across the battlefield for several moments longer, a pause to regroup as much as it was in respect for the one that had just fallen. Even Jade had to take a moment to respect the man. For all the atrocities he'd committed, there was no denying the amount of skill his accomplishments had required. Once everything was boiled down, their goals really hadn't been all that different, simply a different means to the same end. Now it would stand to see if they could make good on the future they had earned.

"Is everyone okay?" Guy was the first to speak up, breaking the tense silence. The sound shattered the heavy moment and drew everyone together from where they had been scattered across the platform.
"For the most part," Asch replied.

"So now what do we do?" Anise asked "I guess we've still got to find those fomicry facilities, huh?"

"That's very true," Natalia agreed. "Van may be gone, but we still need to put an end to his plans." Before anyone could utter a response, a violent shudder rattled the entire island, leaving everyone scrambling to maintain their balance.

"What was that?" Anise pitched.

"Well that didn't take long," Asch muttered.

"Indeed," Jade agreed. "Without Van to suppress Lorelei's power, the Seventh Fonons are too unstable. The island is still an incomplete replica, it won't take long for it to begin coming apart."

"Meaning what exactly?" Guy asked, his voice sharp with concern.

"I doubt the island will hold together once we free Lorelei," Asch provided. "You guys need to clear out as fast as you can."

"But what about-"

Jade's sigh cut Tear's protest off. Adjusting his glasses, he met the boy's gaze over their rim. "Are you both sure?"

Luke and Asch simultaneously nodded.

"Aright then," Jade replied. "I doubt the fomicry facilities will survive the island's collapse so we'll take our leave. First, however, there is one last thing to attend to."

"Oh?" Asch inquired, watching Jade step forward from the others. Stopping a foot in front of him, the Colonel extended his right hand. Asch smiled and reached for it, but as he did, the Colonel retracted it.

"No," Jade mused. "That's not quite right, is it?" Lowering his right hand, Jade offered his left instead. Asch's smile spread to a grin and he took the Colonels left in his own, giving it a firm shake.

"Who'd have ever thought?" His smirk widened.

"Certainly not I," Jade returned.


"You're welcome," he answered. "Though really, you ought to give them more credit, don't you know your friends better than that by now?"

Luke wasn't left with much time to ponder Jade's cryptic message. No sooner had he let go of the Colonel's hand, he found Anise latched onto his waist. "You guys are jerks, the both of you."

"Good to know some things never change," Asch fired back at her.

"Oh please," the dark haired girl returned, unwrapping herself from Luke. "You two are ten times worse. Who do you think you're talking to here? Sure it worked the first time but we know you
"way better than that. Besides..." Anise wrapped her arms around Asch. "I'm invested in the two of you. I need someone whose name has weight if I'm going to claw my way back up the Order's ranks. So you had better hurry your sorry ass back."

Asch laughed outright. "I'll keep that in mind," he managed between chuckles.

"And..." Anise continued, her voice softer than before. "I'm glad to see you happy."

"What?" This time confusion painted the monarch's face and he looked down at Anise who responded only by pulling him in closer, burying her face in his jacket.

"You used to be a real snot. A closed off brat... and I couldn't stand you... but... I'm glad you let me see the person behind all that. I'm glad I got to really meet you. We're really just getting to know each other so... make sure you come back, got it?"

"Got it," Asch said with a smile.

"Good." Anise gave him one final squeeze before letting go. "Well, good luck with this one," she shot playfully, nudging Guy with her elbow as he brushed past her.

"Hey," Guy protested, jostled by Anises jibe, but he chuckled when her cheeks puffed up. It wasn't half as much fun when he didn't jump at the contact. "Well," he spoke up facing both his former charges. "She's not the only one who never changes."

"And what exactly are you trying to imply?" Asch asked tauntingly.

"Exactly," Guy fired back. "Though really, you guys could have said something." 

"What are you talking about, Guy?" Luke asked.

"Come on now Luke," Guy chastised his best friend. "You didn't think we were blind, did you? We're your friends; we know when something's not right. It's funny, I used to think I'd look forward to the day you didn't have to rely on me all the time, but now that you're able to handle these things yourself, I kind of miss it."

"I'm sorry Guy," Luke hung his head.

"Don't be, it just goes to show how much you've grown. I know why you made the choice you did, and you had the courage to hold through to the very end. I'm proud of you Luke."

"Thanks."

"That doesn't mean that I'm going to let it slide next time though," the blond pinned Luke with a glare. "When you get back I'm going to show you what we do with people who keep secrets from their friends."

"I'll look forward to it," Luke said.

"I'm going to hold you to that. You better not bail on me. That goes for both of you."

"Nice try," Asch remarked.

"Not a chance," Guy fired back. "You are just as guilty as Luke is. I'm going to teach both of you not to hold out on your best friend."

"Really?" Asch asked, betraying a hint of surprise.
"Of course, you idiot." Guy placed an arm around the older redhead. "You're both my best friends, so you're both going down together."

"Well then, I'm looking forward to seeing you try," Asch replied mischievously.

"Good." Guy put a hand on each of his charges heads and simultaneously ruffled their hair. "When you get back, we're on."

"Hey!" Asch protested, but Guy didn't turn around, instead simply raising a hand and giving the pair one final wave.

"Luke..." Tear began, hesitantly approaching the younger redhead.

"What is it, Tear?" Luke asked, his entire face painted with a gentle light.

All the words she wanted to say were suddenly caught in her throat. Listening to the others' conversations with the twins had set her stomach roiling; uncovered ancient doubts that she had long since wanted to leave buried. How could she even give voice to such fears? She had let herself become caught up in her feelings for Luke, caught up in the chaos of everything that was going on around them because she was afraid of what she would find if she actually sought an answer. It was always a thorn at the back of her thoughts, though. A persistence that told her if she didn't figure things out she would regret it forever.

"Are..." Tear fought to tame her voice. "Are we really saying goodbye?"

"For now," Luke replied gently. As the words escaped his lips, he smiled at her, and that smile made Tear's heart stop.

It was an expression she had never seen on Luke before. She'd seen him smile countless times, smiled in the face of a multitude of emotions, from awe to elation to an earth-shattering sorrow, Tear had seen them all. This time was different though. This smile hid everything and nothing all in the same breath, and Tear knew it like she'd woken to it every day of her life.

It was a smile that told her she'd never see him again.

"Luke! Promise me!" She choked out, tears threatening to spill over. "Promise me you'll come home! Promise you'll come back to me! I... I love you Luke!"

"I love you too Tear," Luke replied, pulling the melodist into his arms. Here she was flooded with his warmth, against his chest she could feel his heart beat. Strong and steady it pulsed through her and she held him back, letting her tears spill over. Though his words warmed her, they did little to appease the small boulder that sat sickeningly in the pit of her stomach.

He hadn't promised.

"Please Luke," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "Swear to me, you'll be coming back after this. Please promise me... promise me we'll be together again."

"I promise you Tear," Luke's voice filled her ears. "I promise I'll come back to you. Wherever you go and no matter what happens I'll be by your side. We will be together again."

"I'll wait for you," Tear replied. "I'll wait as long as I have to." Tear felt Luke's entire posture sink into her gesture and he held her for all she was worth.

"I knew about the two of you, you know," Natalia's voice snapped Asch back to reality. Completely focussed on Luke and Tear's discussion, he hadn't even noticed her approach. Natalia only waited for his eyes to meet hers before continuing.

"Did you really intend to keep your secret until the end? Were you really going to just disappear without ever saying anything?"

"Yes, I was," Asch answered directly.

Natalia was struck by Asch's bluntness, but the shock lasted for no more than a second before an entire surge of emotions flooded her. All the anger, the fear that she had buried away for the past month, the nights that she lay awake in bed trying to will it all away, the indignation at having it kept from her surged and she could feel tears in her eyes. "Why? Why would you do such a-

Natalia was silenced by Asch's lips, his kiss swallowing any of the protests that might have come forth. Flustered, the princess stepped back, and for the first time she could see the regret in his eyes. The part of him that had never wanted to harbour such a painful secret, that had suffered in silence so that such an ugly truth would never come to light. "Why..." she asked again.

Asch stepped forward until she could feel his breath against her skin. He reached up and tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear. Natalia found herself completely lost in his emerald gaze.

"Because," his voice came out gently. "Because this is what I want you to remember: not the pain, the fear, the unknown... just that I love you."

"I love you too Asch-"

Natalia was cut off by a second shake, much stronger than the first and one of the pillars across the roof slipped from its base, shattering against the marble rooftop.

"We need to go," Jade re-iterated. "It's getting more violent, we need to be clear of the island's main infrastructure before Asch and Luke free Lorelei."

Natalia bit her lip, turning to Asch one final time. "I believe in what you told me in Chesedonia... I trust in those words, and I will hold you to that promise."

Asch smiled, letting go of her hands. "I wouldn't break it for the world."

"Tear," Natalia called, offering a hand to her friend.

The melodist reluctantly allowed herself to be pulled from Luke, though every inch of her screamed in protest. She didn't want to leave! It didn't matter if the island collapsed around her, if that was to be her fate, then so be it. She wasn't just going to leave him here!

"Luke!" Tear turned around, but was halted when she saw the look on Luke's face. Though his lips were still twisted into a smile, there was such a sharp pain behind his eyes, Tear could feel her heart being ripped out. She understood then; more than anything, Luke was doing this for her... for all of them. He shouldered this burden so that they could give birth to a new hope, a new future... and a world in which everyone could keep smiling. After all, isn't that all she ever wanted for him? Choking down the ice in her throat, Luke smiled for her and Tear knew she couldn't ask for anything more.

"Goodbye... Luke."

Luke held his composure while his friends crossed the platform, and it wasn't until they were
finally out of sight that he let a tear slip down his cheek.

"You're such a liar," Luke's broken voice came out.

"So are you," Asch answered gently and Luke wiped his eyes dry. He smiled weakly, a gesture that did little but echo the lingering ache of farewell. Asch felt it too, the regret that throbbed in the pit of his stomach, but in the same breath there was a satisfaction that sat there, making the pain bearable.

"You're right," Luke said, giving voice to their silent feelings. "I wouldn't have done things any other way."

"Me neither," Asch agreed. Another quake rattled the island, sending a massive crack splitting through the platform on which the siblings stood. "Looks like our time is just about up," he commented when the tremors didn't immediately subside. "Shall we?"

"Yeah," Luke agreed, pulling the Key of Lorelei from his sheath.

Standing over the ground where Van had fallen, Luke could distinctly feel the blade pulse. The Jewel began to glow, bathing the sword in an eerie red light. His arms shaking, Luke held the Key forward, blade pointed straight at the ground. Asch reached out and placed his hands on the hilt over Luke's, the action bathing both siblings in a familiar golden glow. Asch looked up and his eyes met his brother's.

"Ready?" Asch asked.

Luke firmly nodded. "For our friends."

"For tomorrow."

The Key of Lorelei plunged into the stone below them, and the moment it did, a fonic glyph traced itself across the grounds. Surrounded by a mass of Seventh fonons, the roof below them shattered and the siblings found themselves supported by the power of the Key alone. Pieces of stone rained down about them, harmlessly shattering against the barrier that had enveloped the pair if they fell too close. Asch watched on silently as the last of Van's replica world crumbled around them, hoping only that everyone had escaped safely.

No. He didn't wonder, he knew. They knew. Their friends were just fine.

A flicker of flame erupted at the base of the barrier, disappearing so quickly Asch was sure he'd imagined it. The second fire was not so transient and before long they were swirling about the noble, painting the world in orange and gold. Asch reached out and one of the flames passed across his hand. It was warm, not the scalding heat that one would expect of a fire, but the warmth of a summer day, of a loved one's embrace. It was an all encompassing feeling of safety, gratitude.

Thank you.

The deep voice resonated within their minds, and the swirling flames congregated, tracing out a vaguely humanoid shape, all while still dancing about them.

You have sacrificed much and made it far, and you efforts have not gone unnoticed. You have both done admirably.

"Do you think... we really succeeded?" Luke asked.
The Score I gave to Yulia that day is no more. You have taken her future and you have made it your own. This world owes you a great debt, little one.

"Well we didn't do it alone," Asch replied. "Thank you for all your help along the way, Lorelei."

Though he didn't have a face, Asch could have sworn he saw the being smile.

*I am happy for you. I am glad that you were able to finally find yourself.*

It was Asch's turn to smile at that, and he nodded once, not the least bit surprised by the creature's level of insight. He was glad too, like the shackles he never realized bound him had finally been released.

"Good luck," Asch offered the creature.

*This will not be our final meeting.*

"Well, until then."

*Indeed.*

With one last swirl around them, the flames exploded upwards, painting the darkening sky a brilliant shade of gold before fading completely into the night.

Now alone with Luke in the protected confines of the Key's barrier, Asch felt a peculiar sense of peace flood him, one that he could sense flowing through Luke as well. Though they were isolated here, they could feel the entire world opening up before them, welcoming in a future of endless possibilities. Beyond the overwhelming sense of freedom that had consumed him, Asch felt another, smaller sensation.


Luke's eyes met his brothers and he tried to smile, but the expression only revealed the underlying regret. The young sibling knew he hadn't fooled Asch for a moment and he let out a sigh.

"I just..." Luke began, unsure how to continue. "I wish... we'd had more time, that's all. I look at the future, at all the possibilities that it holds, and it just seems like our lives were so short."

Asch approached Luke until their foreheads were touching. About them the glyph began to recede and the golden glow that encompassed the pair intensified until it washed out everything but each other. "They may have been short," Asch replied, his voice almost a whisper. "But we lived them."


Stepping back Luke smiled; one last true genuine smile and Asch could think of no better start then that.

The last of the fonons dispersed into the air, leaving nothing but darkness and a single thought on the scattered breeze.

*Thank you.*
Farewell is Only the Beginning

It was a night like any other, identical to the past hundred nights in this forgotten place. Under the tender caress of the moon, selenias slowly opened their petals to gleam like stars against the deep green carpet in which they laid. The flowers' pollen glowed in the night air, dancing like fireflies across the secluded valley. Only a whisper differentiated this night from any other, making it stand out from the endless twilights to come.

A single boy stood among the flowers, his golden-crimson hair tossed about behind him, mingling with the night's gentle wind. The white coat draping over his shoulders shone silver like the selenias at his feet, broken only by the black scarf about his neck and tattered cape that fell down his back.

Alone he watched the waves as they played with the moonlight, bathing the overgrown ruins whose silhouette cast shadows over the valley's edge. The once pristine white marble stood weathered, its surface yellowing under the pressure of the elements. Moss clung to the stone surfaces and plants grew aplenty from the degraded structure. It was a testament to the passage of time, merciless, even to those unaware of it.

The boy sighed and as if sensing his emotions, a breeze picked up off the water. The cool caress flowed over the redhead and it struck him how long it had been since he'd felt such a thing. It had been a long time since he had felt the wind, since he had looked upon the stars or listened to waves lapping at the shore. For a brief moment he allowed himself to drown in his senses, allowed himself to be enraptured by the peaceful world surrounding him... to be consumed by the feeling of being alive.

He didn't think it possible to forget the feel of the grass beneath his feet or the scent of the sea air, but the nostalgia of all these things flooded him. So many feelings, so many sensations... it was almost disorienting. Everything that had happened before this moment blurred into a single existence that seemed to stretch out over infinity. Just how long had it been? One year? Five? Ten? A hundred? The flowers had no answer for him.

Here in this secluded place, time was frozen; a concept with no meaning or purpose save to mark the cycle of the blossoms. From here one could watch eternity and be content; the world seemed at peace. There was none of the uncertainty that haunted his memories, none of the burdens, the fear, the sorrow that had once lingered at the back of his mind, just serenity that flowed from the calm of night. It might only be in this valley that he would find such reprieve; beyond its confines he may find turmoil, he may have to face the reality of time's passage, confront the warring memories at the back of his mind. He knew he may have to accept the extent of the sacrifice he had made, but that was a challenge he would accept head on. He was ready to face life again.

The melody was soft at first, carried gently on the evening wind, its sound danced in the valley's peace. Swirling around the boy, the familiar notes rose until their tones could have carried him forward.

Go.

The redhead smiled, turning his back on the fading past and took his first step forward.

She's calling you.
Tear let the last note of her song quiver as it died, carried away into the silent night. Even as she watched it vanish into the silver moon, she could tell there was no power behind the melody anymore. The Grand Fonic Hymn no longer carried the weight she'd once felt when invoking it. Lorelei's pact with Yulia was gone, completed when the being had been set free, but that wasn't why she sang these notes. She sang the fonic hymn because it was that song that Luke had always loved, that he had always asked her to sing. So she would sing for him. She would come and sing for him as often as she was allowed. She had come faithfully for the past two years, and she would keep coming until the day her legs would no longer carry her.

In the ensuing silence Tear waited. What she was waiting for... even the melodist wasn't sure, but she waited none-the-less. Some sign that her voice had reached him somehow, that her music had made him smile as it always had. Anything... she would be satisfied with anything... but still she waited, alone in a valley of memories she could never escape. Somehow in the past two years... the world had kept turning. The world had moved on, leaving her behind, trapping her in the moment Luke and Asch had disappeared. She hadn't moved forward since that day; even though she knew Luke would be ashamed of her... she just couldn't turn her back. No matter how hard she tried to go on, she kept finding herself back here, waiting for a sign that would never come.

Tear couldn't help but wonder what had ever happened to Luke and Asch after they'd parted ways. Had their fonons really separated? Had they really vanished from the world completely, taking that smile of theirs to the end? She couldn't accept that. No matter how many times Jade had explained their condition to her, explained how they had kept it hidden... how Luke had wanted her to smile until the end, she couldn't accept it! She knew Luke wanted her to be happy... she knew he had sacrificed everything so that she could live in this beautiful new world they'd created... and that thought left the melodist in shambles.

Could she really live like he had wanted her to? Could she keep smiling trapped in the past like this?

"Surely you don't intend to sing it only once." A voice interrupted Tear's thoughts.

"Natalia," Tear spoke up, surprised to find she wasn't alone in the valley. The princess stood to Tear's side, her violet dress cutting through the green vegetation surrounding them. Her blonde hair was bound, though it showed signs of being tussled. In her arms a little blue cheagle grinned cheerfully.

"Please sing it again Tear!" Mieu chirped.

"I think we'd all love to hear it again," a third voice came from behind her.

Turning around, Tear found all of her companions standing behind her. Guy, Anise... even Jade had made the trip here. Why?

Then the thought struck Tear, the reason all her friends seemed to be dressed formally. Today was Asch's birthday... the day a ceremony was held in front of graves Tear had never seen. Tear had refused to attend the yearly ceremonies dedicated to the twins. It didn't matter how often she was invited, she would never go to Baticul to see their graves. To go was to acknowledge everything that monument entailed and Tear simply couldn't bring herself to accept that they were truly dead. She knew she wasn't the only one, knew that deep down all of them felt the same way. Perhaps that was why they had all left early, perhaps that was why they all found themselves here, just as they had the previous year. Tear bit back her emotions. How many more years would they be coming here like this?

"What if..." Tear began hesitantly. "What if they never-"
"They will," Natalia replied instantly.

"How can you be so sure?"

"I have faith in the words Asch said to me... and I believe in the promise Luke made to you as well," she replied. "It may take them awhile, but they will definitely return to us."

"Natalia's right," Guy spoke up. "They promised us they'd come back and I'm not letting them get out of it that easily. Besides, I wouldn't make a very good friend if I let them break their word like that, now would I?"

"I'll always wait for Master!" Mieu piped up. "I promised Master that I would take care of everyone while he was gone and I'm going to keep my promise too!"

"Those two were the definition of stubborn," Anise declared. "They're the ones who taught me not to give up no matter how hopeless things seemed, so there is no way they would just up and quit on us like that."

"Well, we've accomplished greater things flying on blind faith alone," Jade said with a shrug. "I don't see much point in quitting now."

"Everyone..."

"What do you say Tear?" Guy asked. "One more time?"

Tear felt a smile spread across her face.

"I'd be happy to."

_Luke..._

"Twei Rei Tsuae Croix Ryo Twei Tsuae,"

_I don't know if you can hear me... I don't know if this song reaches your ears, but these feelings, our feelings... I hope they reach your heart. Wherever you are... I want you to know I'm not going to live in the past anymore. I'm going to smile... just like you wanted me to._

"Croix Ryo Tsuae Twei Ryo Rei Nevu Ryo Tsuae,"

_It's been so hard without you here... so hard to wake up each day knowing that I won't see your smiling face, I won't hear you laugh or feel your light. I miss you, and some days it's almost unbearable, but I won't give up. I will keep moving forward._

"Va Rei Zaei Twei Nevu Tsuae Ryo Tsuae Croix,"

_Because I still love you._

"Ryo Rei Croix Ryo Tsuae Rei Va Tsuae Rei,"

_The world is beautiful again... the places and people that you loved so much are at peace. Everything is how you dreamed. The world you loved, that you sacrificed yourself for is finally as you wanted it to be._

"Va Nevu Va Rei Va Nevu Va Tsuae Rei,"

_I hope wherever you are... that you're happy. That you're watching over us and smiling... and that_
you're proud of what you accomplished. As long as you're satisfied... I know that my heart can start moving forward.

"Croix Ryo Croix Nevu Tsuae Rei Croix Ryo Tsuae Rei Va,"

"Even so... I will never give up on the hope you left me. No matter how many years pass, no matter how often this song is carried off on an empty wind, I will wait for you... I will sing for you..."

"Rei Va Nevu Croix Twei Rei Rei"

"Until the day we're together again."

A tear slipped unbidden down the melodist's cheek as the last note of her song faded into the night, swallowed by the stars that watched over them.

A breeze picked up rustling the grasses at Tear's feet, tossing her tan hair across her eyes as she watched the flowers beneath her sway in time with the wind. No one said a word, entranced by the silence that wrapped itself around them, leaving Tear to lose herself in the sounds of the night.

It was so silent that she didn't even perceive it, blending flawlessly into the surrounding noises it was just another part of the world Tear had tuned out. Staring at the flowers that now stood still at her feet, the sound of the grass took a moment to register in the absence of the wind. Then ever so faintly, footsteps discerned themselves and all Tear could hear was the sound of her heartbeat.

Looking up, a single figure cut through the moonlight. His white jacket swayed behind him as he moved forward, tussling the scarf that wrapped around his neck. The moon cast a shadow on his face, hiding his eyes and masking any expression that lay there. Jumping up from the rock on which she'd sat, Tear ran a few paces before stopping, paralyzed with an overwhelming flood of hesitation. What if...

The stranger stopped a few feet from where she stood, looking up to reveal a set of achingly familiar green eyes.

Yet, this was not entirely the boy Tear remembered, that danced carefree through her memories. He was taller than Luke had been, and if possible his hair was an even deeper red. While it was the same length as before, the pieces along the side tapered at his chin, framing a face that despite its soft smile, had an air of seriousness to it that seemed foreign.

Behind her, Tear could feel the same tension, the same air of hesitation from her friends, the atmosphere only fuelling the squall of emotions that flooded her chest. Two years of yearning, of wanting to see Luke again more than anything collided with the uncertainty that the person before her presented. Her heart screamed at her to run into his arms while her mind feared the answer to the question before her in ways she couldn't fathom. Why was he alone? Why... why was there only one of them? And which... Tear knew she couldn't handle the possibility that she was wrong.

"W- why are you..." Tear began.

"I like this place, it's peaceful here. Besides... I made a promise to someone," the boy replied, his voice mixing Luke's youthful tones with the serious accents she knew from Asch. He smiled gently.

Tear's inner wills collided again, and the mention of his promise fuelling both her desire and her fear. She just... she couldn't bring herself to ask. To dare inquire which of the boys they had treasured so dearly stood before them.

"Who..." Anise was the one to finally muster her courage. "Who are you? Are you Asch... or are
"you Luke?"

"All this time, and you still can't tell us apart?"

Everyone flew around as a second voice erupted from behind them. The boy they found there was identical to the first in every way, from the way his hair was styled, to its deep red tones. The voice that escaped him carried the same intonations all while wearing the same gentle, yet almost playful expression. Even the clothes they wore were identical, but with the appearance of this second person, every bit of the hesitancy that hung in the air vanished.

"Asch!" Natalia landed in the second boy's arms, trapping him in her embrace while burying her tears in his black shirt. "I knew you'd come back. I knew you'd return to us!"

The boy sighed and with a smile leaned it.

"I'm Luke," he whispered into her ear. Natalia shook her head, her voice still shaking from the tears of joy that spilled forth.

"You are not, you liar."

Asch smiled, holding her in return. "You've become better at this than I thought."

"So," Jade said, a warm expression dawning his face as he turned back to the first redhead. "Have we passed your test, Luke?"

The seriousness melted away from his expression and he simply smiled, radiating with a light that could have chased away the night.

Tear ran, her legs trailing behind the heart that spurred her forward. She hesitated one last moment, the spilt second before her hands reached him she feared that this illusion would vanish. That she would wake from this dream like she had all the others before it, finding herself alone in her bed with nothing but a broken heart to keep her company.

Luke's warmth flooded her, wiping away such inconsequential thoughts. Her doubts, her fears, her weaknesses, they all melted away under the strength of his support against her. Collapsing into his arms, she wrapped herself around his chest, pulling him so close she could feel his breath against her neck.

"You're... you're really back," Tear managed to choke out through the mixture of relief and euphoria that flooded her. "You came back to me."

"Of course I did," Luke voice sent tears flooding down her face. "I promised you, didn't I? I'm sorry it took so long-"

Whatever words Luke had been about to say were lost as Tear pressed her lips against his and he wrapped his arms around her in return. The future had many paths; many possibilities. Perhaps she could have conquered them on her own, she did have that strength, she knew that now, but in the same breath she also knew that she didn't want to. Here, now, she had finally embraced her future, and her world began turning.

It would be the first day of forever.
Two Worlds

It was a pleasantly sunny day in the city of Daath, home to the Order of Lorelei. The heat beat down on the city's residents and though it was still morning, there was no doubt of the temperatures to which it would climb once the sun was fully overhead. At the moment, however, Tear knew nothing of the weather as she wandered down yet another hallway in the cathedral's massive infrastructure. She found herself wishing that they start installing some windows. It would stand to make the place less dreary and at the very least it might separate one endless hallway from another.

Tear turned to her left, placing a hand on the doorknob she found, but caught herself before twisting the latch and interrupting whoever might have been within. She laughed to herself. It was the second time this morning she had almost made a wrong turn. Really, for a place she'd once called her home, she was quick to forget her way around. Then again, it had never really been a home for the melodist, at least nothing like the place she now considered home. It was simply a place she'd lived once, and certainly not one that she missed to any extent. Passing through the door to her right, Tear was satisfied when she found another corridor; she was still going the right way for now.

The melodist could have chastised herself for her feeble memory but she couldn't quite bring herself to be irritated. After all, she hadn't really lived here since she the day she had set out for Baticul to kill her brother, and been swept off onto a journey with Luke. Four years and counting; time went by so fast. Had it already been a year since the twins had come back? The thought was almost frightening. The years without them had stretched out like an eternity, now they flew by almost faster than she had the time to enjoy them.

Certain she had the correct door this time; Tear was rewarded when the sun momentarily blinded her vision. When the light finally cleared from her eyes, she found one of the cathedral's many courtyards laid out before her. The center had been cleared and a single row of targets lined the far wall. Before them a group of Oracle Knight trainees held their bows, carefully aiming while awaiting the command.

"Fire!" The voice rang through the silent air and a volley of arrows were loosed, though few hit their marks. Several landed in the grass beyond their targets and a handful collided with the boards. Only one student hit the bull's-eye.

Tear could have laughed at the familiar sigh that followed the class' pitiful success rate and the melodist watched bemused as her former instructor told them as much in no uncertain terms. "Now I expect all of you to practice!" The voice rang clearly across the yard. "Your practical exam is in a week and if this is any example of your skill many of you won't be advancing. That is all for today. Dismissed!" A groan echoed from the students and they begrudgingly retrieved their equipment.

"Being as hard on them as always, Major Legretta?" Tear asked, making her way through the students that were now filing back into the cathedral.

"Yes, well if they had half the ambition you did, they'd be alright," Legretta fired back, limping over to meet the melodist.

Legretta's injury from their last battle had never completely healed, and the former God-General had a permanent limp that had retired her from active duty. Tear sighed somewhat sadly but knew better than to let such feelings show on her face. Really, it was a miracle that Legretta had survived at all, and Tear knew she wouldn't take kindly to anything that remotely resembled pity. It wasn't
pity... just regret that things had to turn out the way they had. Yet despite her impediment, Legretta was still one of Daath's most sought out instructors: the Oracle Knights she turned out were top notch and she was quick to remind anyone who thought her incapable that she could still best most of them.

"So," Legretta broke the silence between them with a comfortable smile. "What has you here in Daath?"

"Anise asked me to meet her here," Tear replied. "I'm out delivering a few things on Natalia's behalf."

"The princess must be quite busy these days."

"Yes, now more than ever with all the preparations that have to made. I'm starting to wonder when she finds the time to sleep."

Legretta chuckled. "So will you be attending Kimlasca's wedding?"

"Of course," Tear replied. "No matter how much fuss is going on about it, Luke would never miss Asch's wedding."

"I didn't ask if Luke was attending," Legretta stated slyly. "I didn't realize the two of you were quite that close. Might there be a wedding I'm invited to in the near future?"

"Major Legretta!" Tear protested, her cheeks flaring at the verbal misstep. As much as Legretta chuckled at her student's reaction, she couldn't say she was displeased. If anything it made her happy. While she still held fast to the memory of the one she once held dear, she wouldn't wish such tragedy on any other. Life was too short, but it seemed such concerns were wasted on Tear. Despite her protests it was clear that she actually hoped for such a thing someday.

"Of course Tear's going to the wedding!" A third chipper voice cut in, and the two women turned to see a head of dark hair bouncing across the courtyard. "She's the maid of honour!"

"W-W-What? Anise! How do you know that?" Tear stuttered. "Natalia hasn't said anything about the bridal party yet."

"Oh please," Anise replied mischievously. "It's the royal wedding! It's all the hottest gossip right now!"

"Since that's all that ever goes on in Daath anyway," Legretta added sourly.

"I hear you. I like gossip as much as the next person, but I don't think even I could handle listening to the trainees all day. You've got it rough. But anyways!" Anise quickly diverted the topic. "Sorry to keep you waiting Tear!"

"It's alright," Tear replied. "I haven't been here long, and I'm sure with your new job you've been quite busy."

"Tell me about it! It's way more work than I thought it would be!"

"You should be proud though," Tear commented. "You're the youngest Captain of the Fon Master Guard they've ever had."

"I can see why," Anise sighed. "I've got enough paperwork on my desk to age me ten years!"
"How is the new Fon Master doing?"

"Oh the old fogey is fine," Anise grumbled. "Man! Why didn't I get a shot at it?"

"Because they decided that no one who hasn't come of age should hold the position," Legretta replied.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Anise sighed. "They figured all the stress of the job was too much for a kid; that it's what ultimately did Ion in... so I guess it's fair. I'm not going to give up though! There's always next time. Besides, the older he is, the sooner I get another shot!"

Legretta sighed and shook her head. "The Fon Master isn't that old, the staff here is just getting younger."

"That's right, I heard Sync got promoted again," Tear commented.

"Yeah, he's the new Commandant now," Anise confirmed. "For all his demotions after the kerfuffle with Van, he's flown right back up the ranks. The kid might still be a snot, but he's pretty damn good at his job. He'd never say it, but I think he really enjoys it too. At least he enjoys tearing a strip out of his God-Generals. That kid is downright scary when he's on a mission."

"That somehow doesn't surprise me," Tear said.

"Me neither," Anise agreed. "Though I can't say much for the increase in staff turnover since he got the job. On that subject, do you know how many times we've tried to get Luke over here? We're still a few God-Generals short and I'm sure he'd fit right in."

"He knows," Tear answered. "But I don't think that's what he wants, at least not right now."

"Is he sure?" Anise asked, her voice bordering on pleading. "I admit, it would be kind of weird to take orders from Sync, but I swear he really isn't that bad. He might take some getting used to, but as long as you're not a complete moron he's actually pretty great to work for."

"I think the answer is still 'no'. At least for now."

"Oh alright," Anise conceded with a shrug. "Still, tell your future husband that there's a spot open for him if ever wants it."

"Anise, not you too!" Tear flushed while the Anise erupted into giggles.

"So what brings you all the way out here on such short notice?" Anise asked.

"Right!" Tear reached down into her bag and pulled out an ornate white envelope. "Natalia asked me to deliver these for her."

Anise took the envelope and flipped it over, examining the embossed silver lining before looking curiously back up at Tear. "An invitation? But I got mine in the mail weeks ago."

"It's probably for the private ceremony, right?" Legretta guessed.

"That's right," Tear replied. "With all the formalities that the royal wedding is going to entail, they wanted to do something smaller and more personal, with just friends and family."

"Natalia's planning two weddings? Man, that girl is out of her mind. She must be going crazy trying to organize all of that."
"It's a lot of work, but she also has a lot of help," Tear pointed out. "I don't know what the maids in the castle will ever do once the wedding is over."

"I am so glad I'm not Asch right now," Anise said with a chuckle.

"I don't know if he'd have room to give his input if he wanted to," Tear answered, her voice buoyant with laughter.

"Well, let Natalia know that I'll definitely be there!" Anise said. The young girl turned to head back into the cathedral before stopping with one last thought.

"And tell her to have really nice party favours!"

Tear laughed outright.

"I'll pass that along."

The afternoon sun streamed in through the window, bouncing off the crimson hair that stood centered in its frame and across the small room in which the future monarch stood. The room didn't have any particular purpose, but it was for that reason that Asch found comfort here. With no one coming or going, it gave him the opportunity to gather his thoughts before tending to important matters.

Asch absentmindedly adjusted one of the belts on his uniform, the formal dress becoming more common than his casual wear of late, though he found he missed the latter more and more, especially as the castle tailor got increasingly elaborate with each new piece he was given. At this rate it would take him all day just to get dressed for a meeting. Asch made a mental note to stop by and ask him to tone it down a bit later this afternoon. It seemed everyone was getting caught up in the excitement of the impending wedding.

Adjusting the last belt, Asch noted his sword was missing, and for a brief moment he debated running upstairs to fetch it from his room, but the idea was quickly discarded. It was an ornamental piece at best and he didn't care to return to the hustle of the castle just yet.

It was still strange for Asch to think of the castle as his home, even though it had been for several months now. He'd officially moved into the castle around the same time the wedding had been made public and it seemed everything had been chaotic ever since. Though Asch knew there would always be a place for him in the manor, it was still another change among the many that seemed to be taking place these days.

'Do you miss it?'


'Sometimes,' Asch replied simply. 'I think I miss it more because I miss the times when things were simpler.'

A mental chuckle came across their connection. 'I know what you mean.'

No, moving to the castle wasn't the only big change in Asch's life. Luke had also moved out of the manor shortly after their return, and even though it had been over a year now, he still wasn't completely used to not seeing his little brother on a day-to-day basis. They still had their connection, and they talked as much, if not more often than they would have were they both living in Baticul. Nothing at all had changed between the two for the distance between them, but there
were still days he really missed Luke. Perhaps that too was because the time he spent with Luke was easy. Life became simple, even if just for a little while.

Things between Kimlasca and Malkuth weren't perfect, though they were improving and a far cry from the tensions that had once risked exploding into war at any day. His relationship with Peony was good; it was nice to be friends with the Malkuth Emperor, but at the same time it made it that much more difficult when they were at odds over a particular issue.

All the hard feelings between the countries hadn't vanished overnight, and now that all the chaos from the miasma and lowering of the Outer Lands had settled, many of the citizens on both sides had returned to their old ways. Asch was determined not to back down that road, and he knew Peony felt the same, so it was merely a matter of them getting there.

'You've got a lot on your mind,' Luke commented.

'Yeah, there's a big meeting today. One of the researchers is presenting the latest designs to come out of Jade's lab among other things. They think they've got a solid non-fonon based energy source for us this time.'


'He did,' Asch said with a chuckle. 'But it's Jade; the man does everything. He just got a medical facility for replicas on its feet and from what I hear, his lab is now working on replicating rare medicinal herbs. He has a branch that does energy research on the side though.'

'So what do you think of his latest idea?'

'I don't know yet, I've seen the design, but I wonder if we really could use steam on that large of a scale. I guess I'll find out later.'

'Steam, huh?' Luke pondered. 'That sounds a bit more reliable than Dist- sorry,' Luke cut himself off. 'Than Saphir's wind turbines. Man, he's going to be fuming that Jade has something out.'

Asch laughed at the thought. The former God-General had taken up his old name and had invested all his efforts into energy research, determined to beat Jade to the punch. No doubt he'd be in an uproar over the latest developments, but Asch didn't doubt that would only further spur his efforts. The competition between their respective research labs was enough to put Class M and Class I to shame.

'I like Saphir's wind turbines,' Asch admitted. 'But they're limited to places with reliable wind, which sadly isn't many.'

'Well, it's not like the level of fonons has dropped so low that people can't function.'

'True, though they have decreased.'

'You still have time to sort things out,' Luke said calmly. 'Don't invite trouble, you have enough of that on your plate as it is with the wedding coming up and all.'

'Don't remind me,' Asch teased.

'How is Natalia doing, anyway?'

'She's been keeping herself busy. Between all our meetings and planning the wedding, I'm starting to doubt she goes to bed at night. She's feeling the stress of everything, that's for sure.'
'She is loving every second of it, and you know it.'

'True,' Asch chuckled. 'But I'll be glad when she just settles on a centerpiece already!'

Luke laughed. 'Actually, on the subject of weddings, I heard that Nephry stepped down as Governor of Keterburg.'

'That doesn't surprise me; she'd been considering it for awhile now.'

'You just might have some competition for Royal Wedding of the Year,' Luke taunted slyly.

'I wonder if I'll get an invitation,' Asch asked jokingly.

'That depends entirely on how early you kick Peony out of your reception for stirring things up.'

'Who said I invited him?' Asch asked.

'I sent it for you.'

'What?'

'That's what I'm here for,' Luke stated simply.

'I'm going to kill you.'

'Okay, but wait until after the wedding. I promised the cheagles all the leftover vegetables if they behaved for the entire party.'

'You didn't seriously...'

'Who knows?'

Before Asch could iterate exactly how badly we was going to murder his little brother if the entire mass of cheagles showed up at his wedding, the door behind him cracked open.

'Later,' Luke said with a lingering chuckle, sensing the visitor and bowing out.

Wondering just who knew to find him here, Asch turned to see his father enter the room.

"The meeting is about to begin," Duke Fabre announced. "They'll be awaiting your presence in a few moments."

"Thanks," Asch replied with a smile. "I'll head over in just a minute."

"Gathering your thoughts?" His father asked, coming to stand next to his son.

"More or less."

"And how is your brother doing?"

Asch almost chuckled. "Same as always."

"In that much trouble?"

"More."

"You seem more relaxed than earlier today," the duke commented. "Did you figure something out
regarding the other issue at hand today?"

"Not really," Asch confessed, though he couldn't deny the stress that had been melted away by his conversation with Luke.

"What are your thoughts on the matter?"

"I'd like to continue to offer Kimlasca's support towards the efforts to rebuild Akzeriuth," Asch stated.

"It's a noble thought, but it is also become taxing on our own resources to continue offering the kind of support we have been giving until this point. Akzeriuth's economy has been improving; perhaps it is time that they rely on themselves and their own country."

"Kimlasca's efforts have been vital up until this point, particularly given we have better trade routes into the area. In addition the supplies coming from Akzeriuth have been of great benefit to Kimlasca. It is an effort worthy of our support."

"And by trading with Akzeriuth, Kimlasca is already helping them financially. Additional support may no longer be necessary."

"But-"

"Remember you are biased towards the issue because it is a project Luke has been heavily involved in. You must not let that cloud your judgement. This is a decision you are making on behalf of your people, not yourself."

"Perhaps you're right," Asch pondered. He turned to face his father and found the man's unwavering gaze staring him down. Once he would have taken such words as criticism, as undue harshness over his desire to simply help out. He'd have seen that objectivity as distance and uncaring when really, all he wanted, all his father ever wanted, was to help him think things through properly. He could see that now.

"Thank you, Father. I think I'm ready."

"Then let's not keep Kimlasca waiting any longer."

Luke sighed, popping the last bite of his sandwich in his mouth while listening to the sound of water against the rocks. The midday sun was well overhead and the recent heat wave had put a bit of a damper on the workers. Not that Luke could complain, they'd increased their numbers exponentially since the project was first kicked off. The thought made the young noble smile; it didn't seem so long ago that the very first boards went up, now Akzeriuth had become a bustling community. Albeit still a small one, it was growing faster and faster as more people moved in to stake their claim in the growing town.

Once the Outer Lands had been lowered, the crater marking the old Akzeriuth had filled in with seawater and the lingering minerals in the stone has given rise to lush aquatic plant life, which in turn had drawn in vast numbers of fish and other marine life. With the steep rock walls from the crater's edge making for a natural port, it was one of the best fishing spots in Auldrant. Even with only a handful of buildings, the economy was steadily growing and they were starting to export product to other cities. If things kept up, it wouldn't be long before Akzeriuth could stand on its own, without the help they'd been receiving from the two capitals.

"Hey there Luke, what are you up to?" Luke looked up to see his best friend wander over.

"The usual then," Guy said with a chuckle.

"Pretty much."

"Well don't get too lazy, or the people are going to start following your lead."

"In this heat, that may not be a bad thing," Luke pointed out.

"It'll be worse if winter comes around before they've got roofs over their heads," Guy countered.

"I'll pass on the repeat of last year, thanks," Luke waved his hand casually, but the gesture only served to make him hotter and he quickly lowered it. "Tear has patience, but if we had to cram one more person into that house she just might have strangled someone."

"That reminds me, where is Tear? I haven't seen her around lately."

"She went to visit Natalia, and if I know that girl she has Tear running all over Auldrant right about now."

"That's our favourite princess for you," Guy chuckled. "How is the planning for the weddings coming along?"

"Oh the weddings are fine," Luke muttered in mock irritation. "Now if she'd just take a break to actually sleep, Tear might get to spend a few days at home."

"It's not easy being the maid of honour," the blond commented. "Though with you being the best man, shouldn't you be helping?"


"Come on, Luke. Stop that," Guy shot back with as much seriousness as he could muster through the grin on his face. Luke erupted into a spry smile.

Even though it had been a year, Guy still wasn't comfortable with his new title, no matter how good of a job he was doing. Peony had appointed him to the spot once Akzeriuth had gotten up off the ground, much to the dismay of several other Malkuth nobles who had wanted the position. Even from here Luke could see his manor that was still under construction on the eastern edge of town. Guy hadn't wanted anything elaborate, but it kept getting bigger as Peony got his say in the matter. Something about Jade needing a place to retire.

Not far behind the growing estate was a clearing that had become an almost permanent home for the second Albiore. Noelle was as common a sight on Akzeriuth's streets as any of them and her help in transporting supplies for the construction effort had become invaluable. Ginji offered a helping hand wherever he could too, but his transport and delivery service had really picked up as of late and their pilot was constantly on the move. He'd still drop everything on a dime if it meant helping his friends out, especially Asch.

Noelle on the other hand could easily be counted as Akzeriuth's most dedicated volunteer. If the chipper pilot wasn't ferrying supplies she could be found helping the townsfolk and she'd all but permanently set up residence in the growing town. Instead she chose to stay in Guy's manor, where the blond had offered her one of the steadily multiplying rooms. Luke chuckled and wondered how long it would be before there were little balls of blond hair running through the streets.
"What's so funny?" Guy asked.

Luke glanced back at the small building he called home before returning his gaze to the manor. "I don't know, it kind of pales in comparison, don't you think?" He asked light-heartedly.

"Please," Guy sighed with mock exasperation. "If you want it, just take it."


It was true that the house he and Tear shared was small, especially when cast against Guy's manor, but unlike his best friend, Luke didn't intend to stay in Akzeriuth forever. He and Tear had talked about their future, but had yet to decide what they would do once Akzeriuth was back on its feet. Luke knew his father hoped that he would return to Baticul. With Asch on the throne, there wasn't anyone to take over his territory as a Duke. Now that he'd been gone for awhile, Luke realized he actually did miss the city, and he missed being near his older brother, but Luke wasn't sure if becoming a Duke was something he wanted. He still didn't know where he wanted his future to take him.

And that... that was the most beautiful thing of all. There was no one and nothing to tell him what he supposed to do or who he was supposed to be. Luke embraced the uncertainty, the possibilities that the future held. He didn't need to have an answer yet. There was time to consider each path and to make that choice for himself... he had all the time in the world. He, Asch, everyone... they had discovered their future, and they would take it on with everything they had.

Luke debated opening his connection with Asch again but it didn't take a second for him to realize his sibling was busy. The pang of homesickness took a moment to pass, and when it did Luke felt lighter. It was hard being apart from his family, apart from Asch, but that too was just one of the challenges he had to overcome.

"Hey Luke!" Guy called. "If you're done being lazy, come help us get the south wall of the inn up!"

Besides... he still had his friends, he had Tear and he had his dreams. Luke smiled and he eagerly jogged off after his best friend. "Coming!"

No matter where life took him, he and Asch would always be connected. Though they may not always be at each other's side, they had each finally found their world; their place where they belonged. And once they did, they finally realized the truth.

That world was one and the same.

Fin

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