

Those We Could Save

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Those We Could Save

by [kromeriffic](#)

Summary

What if fate had followed a different path at the Vault?

What if it had been *forced* along a different path?

Chapter 1

"Smile for me, my friend. It suits you far better."

And then she was no longer holding her friend but a hollow shell, while hot blood soaked her clothes and her enemy withdrew, unpunished.

The following days were a blur. How could she tell Count Edmont how deeply she shared his grief, when she and Haurchefant had so little time together?

She'd only been included in the group of principal mourners because her status as a ward of House Fortemps barely made up for her being an outsider.

And so she'd stood at the ceremony, tears freezing on her cheeks and her heart's howling matched only by the wind, fixing her gaze on a wayward patch of fur on the Count's garments because to meet anyone else's eyes would shatter her self-control.

Sleep left her. She merely huddled without rest in her quarters for days on end, watching beams of sunlight move across the floor, and counting bricks to try to numb her mind.

It took the most rigid discipline to begin moving again, to wash and dress and leave her quarters, step after faltering step.

Discipline, and the knowledge that Haurchefant would be devastated if she sank beneath her grief.

He told her once about how every Ishgardian mind had changed when the snows came, how they'd become accustomed to filling their bodies with duty and obligation when rations could not be had. The alternative was to let the cold claim them, and that they would not permit.

She could almost hear him now, feel the way he'd clap a bracing hand on her shoulder and say, "Hold fast to your duty, my dear friend, and let no sorrow turn your path."

"Fuck duty," she spat at his grave, and it didn't ease the pressure in her chest one bit.

She owed him everything: her life, her refuge from danger, the thawing of her heart after so long -

She owed him everything. She should not be angry with him.

She was furious.

Aurore woke with a start. Clutching at sheets that fought back, her breath was choked with rage and sorrow both, before she could regain her balance.

Her head was pounding, a clear sign of the Echo, and she could not keep herself from groaning, sitting up and clutching her head while the room span around her in odd little jerks.

None of the local chirurgeons had an explanation for why her headaches were getting worse; those few who had even heard of the Echo only knew it as a fairy story at best.

Haurchefant was standing at the window when she woke, watching the dark snow and apparently lost in thought, but at the noise he was all attention; rushing to the bed, reaching to rub her shoulders and draw her tension away.

"Haurchefant, please don't fuss. It's passing already."

That was true enough: the pain was certainly easing, but in its wake she still felt flushed and strange.

She slowly clenched her hands into fists, relaxed them, trying to feel the control over her own flesh.

Predictably, Haurchefant had ignored her feeble pretence. He hadn't stopped massaging her, and as he discovered a tight knot of muscle at the base of her neck, he gave a forceful sigh.

She could feel it, a huff of breath stirring the tendrils of hair at her ears. He must be as frustrated as she was.

"What time is it?"

"Just past midnight." He pressed a quick kiss on the side of her neck, moved back to rubbing her shoulders, moving the fabric of her night clothes aside without asking.

"Augh! Why did you let me turn in so early? I can't go back to sleep now."

"You needed the rest."

Flat, solid, stern. There was no arguing with that tone.

He finished his ministrations, gently restored her top, moved beside her and scrutinised her profile.

Silence filled the room while she stretched and rolled her shoulders back.

He wouldn't ask again, not since she brushed him off the first time, but she could see he was waiting for her to offer details.

How could she tell her husband that she had increasingly vivid visions of his death? A world where he'd been murdered trying to protect her?

And more: in that world Aurore had never hung up her lance. She still got dragged into battles against minor gods born from desperation. She still got called on automatically, to solve any problem: personal, and political, and all the ones in-between.

She'd never even made a true home.

All Haurchefant knew of her visions was that they involved danger to him - which was an understandable fear.

Garlemald's appetite for conquest was insatiable; the Twelve knew it was a question of when, not if, Ishgard itself would be threatened.

The abuses the Garleans carried out during each acquisition were notorious, especially against those they deemed a threat: any person of an age to take up arms against them, and then their families threatened in turn to ensure the savages' obedience.

Battered and near-collapse from the centuries-long struggle against the dragons, and the territories lost to the ice since, it had long been decided that the Holy See of Ishgard would surrender to the Garleans, in exchange for the citizens' safety. What population and structure remained had to be protected at all costs.

What the Garleans did to Limsa Lominsa was a clear lesson in how they would answer to resistance.

Aurore hadn't been able to go near the sea since.

There was something more to tonight's vision, though. She scowled to herself, trying to order the brief impressions she had-

It was as though she'd been watching her life - her real life, settled with Haurchefant in their home - contained in a bubble for her to study from the outside. Beautiful, isolated, fragile.

And there was something else: a voice she felt she should recognise, inviting, commanding...invoking. A summoning.

Summoning her.

She shivered, and nearly jumped a malm when Haurchefant slipped his arms around her waist.

"If you cannot speak it, perhaps you'll allow me to offer a distraction?"

Willing her heart to slow down again, she turned in his arms and tried to muster a smile. From the quirk in Haurchefant's eyebrows, he wasn't fooled.

"Perhaps...yes."

And she let him pull her back to bed.

The sky was tinged with pre-dawn grey when she slipped out of their room. Sneaking a glance back inside before closing the door, it was a relief to see Haurchefant still asleep. Explaining herself was a complication she couldn't face right now.

Aurore hated keeping secrets from him. She had never needed to before, but it was entirely possible that telling Haurchefant the details of her vision would create the exact conditions needed for it to come true.

Jumping in to protect her from attack at the cost of his own life was so exactly the kind of thing he'd do that she was profoundly glad he hadn't been put in that position in this life.

This life?

...She was definitely going mad. "This life" was her life here and now, her real life. There was no other.

She hunched over some coffee in the kitchen and wondered whether it was safe, or even possible, to contact the remaining Scions. She didn't know if they'd had any success going to ground before the Garleans took control; didn't know if they even lived.

Before moving to Ishgard, her visions gifted by the Echo had only shown the past - her own or other people's - so why was it behaving differently now?

From what little she knew of the Echo, ignoring its warnings would spell disaster. There was no alternative but to contact the Scions once more.

Perhaps she should search for Urianger first - she could certainly trust him to be discreet - and if he couldn't help, he'd at least know where to point her next.

It had been a long time since she'd picked up her lance, and longer still since she'd left Ishgard, but now she'd decided on a course of action she felt calmer already.

The kitchen was very quiet, the profound silence after a storm when snow blanketed everything afresh, and the denizens of the city had not begun their errands yet.

How long had it been, exactly?

Her temples throbbed with a fresh wave of pain.

("Something's very wrong. I can't find her on the Source, but she couldn't be anywhere else!")

How long had she been living here? When was the last time she saw any land outside of the Holy See?

The weak sunlight was too bright, hurting her eyes.

("I must - nnh - must draw more from the Tower...")

She must know. Surely she couldn't forget something as simple as that. Her knuckles whitened around her cup, fingernails scratching into the glaze.

("Wait, I can sense her now. A little. If I focus I can just reach her-")

Was she even supposed to be here?

Was Haurchefant supposed to be dead after all? The foundation of her heart, her dearest one-

And then Haurchefant himself strolled into the kitchen, and fate flowed into the correct channel once more.

As she smiled up in greeting, she saw relief washing over him.

"Ah, my tricky wife! I wanted to bring you coffee in bed this morning, but you sneaked out ahead of me."

"I am good at sneaking, true."

"I'll have to keep a close eye on you if I want to treat you again."

Haurchefant kept his tone light and made an exaggerated show of looking her up and down, but he still couldn't mask his concern. Did he think she could no longer take care of herself? Did he honestly think she would come to harm in her own home?

Aurore drank her tepid coffee, a fresh wave of unease rolling in her gut.

She couldn't remember what she'd been doing before Haurchefant entered the room.

In another world the Crystal Exarch staggered and fell to his knees. Only the support of his staff kept him from pitching onto his face entirely.

He quickly checked that the entrance to his Ocular was still barred and he was still alone, and only then did he try to draw breath, wheezing and choking around the crystal gripping his lung.

Slowly levering himself up to stand, he eventually caught his breath again. He could sense the crackling, aether-saturated air gradually stabilising again; power earthing itself and flowing into the structure of the Tower.

This attempt had cost a lot, forcing him to draw heavily on the Tower's resources, and payment would be as precise as it was relentless.

Sometimes he fancied he could feel each creeping inch of himself being taken by the crystal, but of course the process was far too slow to tell, really, not unless he had to use power at a cataclysmic rate.

He tried not to dwell on the myriad ways such a disaster could appear that would require exactly that sacrifice from him.

He went to one of the Tower's consoles in another chamber, hoping to bury his fears in action and find some clues in the new data at the same time.

At first glance it seemed next to useless, as garbled as the last attempts, but a chance similarity caught his eye. It was as though the base information he'd collected from the Source had been scrambled - but not at random. There was some internal logic to it; the same pattern as the original, but flowing in different directions.

A cypher, he realised.

And every soul on the First depended on him finding the key.

Chapter 2

Ishgard was buzzing.

Rhalgr's Reach had finally fallen. The Resistance there was defeated -

No, the Resistance had only been forced into hiding, Raubahn himself set to command their counter-strike. The Garleans had left a minimal force at the Reach to finish their ailing foe, but were poised to pour over the Shroud like a tide -

No, they had their eye on Thanalan: to flank Gridania and threaten Mor Dhona in one move. Why, the Sultana herself had not been seen in weeks, and with Raubahn in Ala Mhigo -

No, they were bound for Ishgard direct, to secure an easy surrender before regrouping to tackle the other city-states. Why else would the Lord-Commander refuse all petitions, if not to refine the terms of surrender?

Aurore studied the maelstrom of rumour and focused on moving forward, one foot in front of the other. She returned to drilling with the other dragoons, far from the only fighter to take up their weapon anew. She fought at the barracks, and paced unceasingly at home, bolted down meals, took a fitful rest, and woke at dawn to begin again.

"I do not think this is a wise course."

Haurchefant was watching her with a disappointed, worried look she had come to know very well, as she wolfed down some bread, fruit, and tea before leaving to practice.

Wake, wash, eat, and train: this had been her routine for weeks now. She could not search for Urianger until she had regained her condition.

This was the first time Haurchefant had shown open disapproval of her choice, though, and were it any other day she would stay and discuss it with him, but Estinien Wyrmslayer had arrived last night and she was desperate to spar with him again.

He held her hand, reaching between the coffee cups, and all she could do was stare blankly at him.

"I speak from concern about you. You understand, don't you?"

"...No? I am a trained dragoon! We are the teeth of Ishgard! I should never have stopped training. With luck, I may yet make up for the time I lost."

She had to go, Estinien was waiting and she couldn't stay here. Her skin was crawling; she itched to do something, to fight and either win or be defeated. She had no care which way it went, right now.

She needed the release of battle, she realised abruptly. Her body had regained its craving for the desperate struggle, the sweat that froze and the burning blood, the exertion that builds,

and builds, and *builds*. The panting quiet afterwards. But there was no time to examine that right now -

“Lost time,” he murmured, and withdrew his hand. “What about our future, my heart? Will you borrow from one to pay for the other?”

She caught her breath, stung, and unable to shake the feeling that Haurchefant himself was only here, alive, and saying those words *because* of borrowed time. She switched tack, praying he did not notice her hesitation.

“What about the Empire? How am I to conceal my identity in an occupation? They know me. They will not show mercy on any Scion, and less still to the one at the centre of our efforts.”

“That is precisely my concern-”

“Were you ever a knight?” she flared. “Because you are not acting like one.”

There was a cold silence.

She saw the tension in Haurchefant’s jaw, his lips pale, his whole aspect stiff and stern.

She had crossed a line, she knew it, but she could not back down. Though it was couched in hurtful words she could not abandon her point; there was a greater need at stake.

“My lady,” and she winced at the awful, frozen formality. “Should the time come I will take up arms to defend my homeland, though she has not always defended me. Aymeric still places his hopes on negotiating a peaceful surrender and I will *not* put that at risk unless there is no other choice.”

“There are enemy agents hidden everywhere, as we learned with the heretics, to our cost. The more citizens they observe taking up arms, the weaker our suit for peace will become. Do you really think they are not observing the faces of who exactly is readying themselves for battle? Do you think they are neglecting to report where they live and who their families are?”

“If I place them in danger by my actions, then you do the same. Every practised sword on our side grants another few minutes for the children to escape capture, should it come to that. You know *damn* well what the Empire does to its prisoners, and you still refuse to stir yourself?!”

She had almost forgotten that her true aim was to slip away herself, so incandescent with rage and disgust for the man sitting where her husband had been. She had nearly forgotten that when he died – when she *saw* him die, he was not dead - he had been in full armour, sword and shield in hand.

All she knew was that the man she had pledged herself to would *never* have waited to pick up arms when a battle was on the horizon.

“If I am to bring danger wherever I go, I would face it head-on with my eyes open and lance in hand. I will not let you hold me back!”

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He hung in an endless void; lit not by stars, but by crystals that glowed with shards of people's lives. His staff anchored him, safely binding him to the First - he only needed her to join him. He reached out with his other hand, searching, scanning each passing life-fragment for a sign of her. He couldn't see her anywhere.

It has to be you. Only you can save us. Only you. Only you. Only-

"My Lord?"

Lyna's voice resonated through the Ocular, underscored by her footsteps tap-tapping over crystal.

There was no reply.

"My Lord? Are you here?" She tried again, and then slightly quieter, "Grandfather?"

She crept from room to room, finally discovering him curled up in a chair. He was practically nesting in his papers, and she grinned to herself. She could piece together how it went in her mind's eye.

He would have sat at his table, diligent, before feeling his eyes droop. He'd pushed his chair aside – it stood abandoned over there - and decided to move to a softer one. But he still took a sheaf of papers with him, refusing to admit to himself that he was going for a nap, and then

—

He shifted slightly, a soft breath that was certainly *not* a snore ruffling one of the sheets trapped by his cheek, and she couldn't help laughing.

Alas, the sound seemed to be the final thing to wake him, for he shifted again and blearily opened his eyes. She schooled her expression, not wishing to upset him, and tried to suppress the undercurrent of frustration.

He reached into his hood to rub his eyes before he focused on her – his hands were shaking, she noted, which had only happened before when he ignored her warnings to the point of dangerous exhaustion. Any amusement she had felt was gone.

"What is it, Lyna?"

"My lord, you have not rested properly since I found you here three days ago."

"That cannot be why you sought me."

“No, indeed, but scout reports are for those alert enough to receive them. Not someone who cannot stay awake because he was fool enough to pull all-nighters *again*.” Annoyance was edging her tone now.

“I have already asked you to take greater care, for your sake as well as ours. If that will not suffice, then I shall handle matters myself until you can prove that you are rested and capable again.”

“Lyna, this is important-“

“I’m sure it is, my lord. Since you will not share details with me that is all I can say on the matter, but you are harming yourself by refusing to rest. That, I will not permit. I will escort you to your chamber now.”

Wicked white, he had truly angered her now. It normally took much more to push her to this. This was an argument they had had many times before, and as galling as it was to step away from his work he could not marshal his fogged wits into shape anymore.

He meekly followed Lyna down the hall, and as she turned to watch him, waiting expectantly by his door, he saw unshed tears in her eyes.

“*Please* rest, Grandfather, I beg you.”

He was powerless in the face of that. He allowed himself to be ushered into his room, all but fell on his bed, and barely heard the sound of the door closing. As it had happened every time before, no sooner was he horizontal than his mind started whirling – equations he hadn’t tried, wild theories, desperate prayers, an endless reckoning of all his failures.

“Lyna deserves better,” he mumbled into his pillow. “They all deserve better than me.”

“They say that talking to yourself is a sign of madness.” The Exarch’s senses prickled with the familiar tang of a dark portal. He heard a light step onto the floor, the drag of robes behind it.

“Fortunately for you, I am here to listen and so your sanity is assured.”

“Go away, Emet-Selch.”

“Elidibus woke me from my nap,” came the complaint, and the Exarch felt the edge of his bed dip down as Emet-Selch settled himself.

“Summons me all the way to the Source, in his fancy new royal body, just to tell me what I already knew. I even got shot by Varis for my trouble.”

“*Check on developments in the First,*’ he says. *‘Events proceed apace here, go and take care of your side,*’ and so on. I tuned a lot of it out. Elidibus does like to belabour a point.”

“So here I am, *checking*. And I find you being bullied into bed by your lovely Lyna - an entirely enviable situation, by the way – and now you’ve got some scheme that you will sabotage yourself without any help from me, at the rate you’re going.”

The Exarch forced himself upright to study Emet-Selch – who was in turn studying his own immaculate nails, appearing completely disinterested.

The Exarch knew better. If Emet-Selch was here it was because he wanted to be here, and no amount of stubborn silence would make him leave before he achieved his object.

“I cannot find the Warrior of Light.”

Emet-Selch shot him a disbelieving look.

“I’ve been asleep for millennia. You’ll have to be more specific.”

He took a deep breath, unclenching his jaw. Being in the same room as Emet-Selch was vexing at the best of times, for the damnable Ascian had a knack for keeping him off-centre.

“Aurore Kromer, Warrior of Light on the Source. Hyur from Gridania, champion of Eorzea, slayer of primals, and I’m sure a thorn in the side of your empire-“

“It’s hardly my empire anymore, I merely planted the seed.“

“There is none to compare to her. She carries the Echo. She is the chosen of Hydaelyn.”

Emet-Selch’s eyebrow twitched, a heartbeat’s betrayal of emotion before he replaced his mask of boredom.

“Of *course* she is. And you want her here to continue your scratching existence on this Light-cursed land, I take it? Prolong the inevitable a little longer, hmm? It seems like exactly the kind of foolish plan that would appeal to her type.”

The Exarch forced himself to ignore the jibe, tail twitching beneath his robes, and plunged on.

“She is supposed to be on the Source. My summoning is written to find only her; if she were on that star I would know it. She. Is not. There.” His frustration was plain now; to be reduced to asking an Ascian for advice, of all things-

“Huh.” Finally, *finally*, Emet-Selch showed open interest, abandoning his examination of his own elegant hands to look directly at the Exarch.

“She is not dead, for your spell would still find her if that were the case, and you poor mortals have not the trick of passing between shards unassisted. I see. A thorny problem, indeed.”

“I will have to start widening the parameters of the summoning soon, in case I’ve missed something. That risks bringing other souls here instead.”

If she is hidden from Elidibus’ reach as well, we must find her before we can remove her.

“A very interesting problem, yes.”

“This is not some, some, thought experiment! She is needed here to save both worlds!”

She is the turning point of your plan. And you care for her. I wonder...

“Very well, I will find her for you.”

“You- wait, what?”

“I will find her and bring her to where your spell can reach her. Keep at it though – you may still get to her first. Sleep now. Your Lyna is quite correct, you need the rest.”

“No, wait-!”

Emet-Selch briefly held his palm against the Exarchs’ forehead. He was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

Chapter End Notes

Annnnd there's my bastard man, being his usual self.
I hope you're enjoying it so far! <3

Chapter 4

Those with the Echo – and by extension, those who carried Hydaelyn’s “blessing,” for She was greedy for any who awakened – they had a particular feeling to their souls, a song of their own that was broadcast to those who could listen.

The soul-melody pulsed, and called, and drew him in its wake to Ishgard.

Stationed on one of the highest roofs – he thought it was a temple to one of their false gods, but didn’t care to find out for certain - he closed his eyes and allowed his inner senses to swell, casting over the frozen city until the details of the aether-landscape appeared to him.

There, a ribbon of aether with a hue like no other. It criss-crossed over the streets, back and forth, faded and fresh lines overlapping. She had clearly been here for some time; barely a brick had escaped her touch.

He scowled down at the city, lip curling. He could practically smell the stench of Hydaelyn, feel her controlling touch on the soul of this Warrior. He almost, *almost*, felt pity for this Aurore.

His distraction had lost him the “sight” of the aether trails. He took a breath, refocused his attention, and cast his mind back to searching the cobbles-

It was gone. All the trails of that particular soul, vanished. As though she had never set foot here, as though she had never lived, never existed. Yet there was no shift in aether to suggest that something had happened to her. She was just...gone.

Was it possible that she had learned to conceal herself? Most souls here were still too fragmented to regain that skill, but there were always exceptions. For her to stand out among these mortals she may well have that scrap of power.

He clicked his tongue in frustration. There was no alternative but to walk the streets and search by more mundane methods. His shoulders itched at the thought of spending time among these fragments, these parodies of people.

Glamoured in plain, hooded robes, he chose a deserted alleyway to teleport into.

Aurore couldn’t quite remember how they’d come to this, after their argument this morning.

She did remember storming out to the sparring grounds, out of words and out of options; she could no longer stand the look in his eyes, and her own guilt drove her out of the house before she could let something slip of her own plans.

She remembered pouring all her anger into her lance, and allowing the demands of the fight to bring back a semblance of calm.

By the time the final bout had ended - her blade at Estinien's neck and his at her belly - she could see her grin mirrored in his face, and her blood was singing to the same rhythm as his pulse.

And now –

“Gods, Haurchefant, y-you...”

Haurchefant had lavished her with care when she came home, cleaning and dressing the cuts, gently examining each of her bruises and murmuring praise into her skin – how strong she was, how defiant, how he loved the fire in her – and now he was curled between her legs, using his mouth and tongue and fingers to – *oh*, she was surely losing her mind. He was driving her mad with each movement.

Every time a moan escaped her, or a gasp, or Twelve-knew what else she was babbling, he simply hummed in response, and he *still* wasn't stopping.

It took everything she had to keep her hands resting gently on his scalp, combing his hair with her fingers, and not to drag him up and plead for him to *just take her, already, please* -

Another spasm claimed her. Unthinking, she gripped his hair and yanked, and he just *growled* and nuzzled further into her.

When he tired of taking her apart and finally, *finally*, crawled up on top of her to kiss her cheek – when he plunged into her with a hungry noise she sobbed with relief, relishing the feeling of being caged by his arms, completely surrounded by him while he chased his own pleasure.

Later, she rose and dressed, thinking to run to the market before the sun went down.

She turned back to see Haurchefant slumped between the pillows, sated and sleepy and warm, and he wagged his fingers in a cheerful goodbye.

It occurred to her that, while it wasn't the first time they had buried a quarrel like this, he hadn't made any mention of the argument at all.

Even furnished with her name, searching for Aurore Kromer was proving difficult without a description of her to match. After the sixth merchant admitted to knowing nothing, Emet-Selch forced out some brittle farewell, already turning to the next stall –

She was there. *She* was there. Despite her fragmented soul, underneath the taint of Hydaelyn and another corruption he didn't recognise – beneath all that, was a light that he knew all too well.

“Azem?”

He had not meant to speak aloud. A drop in the wind, a lull in the chatter of the others in the market; she had heard him.

She was strolling closer. He tried to swallow around a dry throat, tried to breathe around the catch in his lungs. He stared at her shoulder, her brow, her chin – anything to avoid meeting her eyes.

“Hello, were you speaking to me?”

She stood before him, tall for a Hyur, close enough to see within his hood and of a height to notice his third eye. It drew her gaze for a time, before she remembered herself and looked to him once more.

“Ser? Is aught amiss? Are you unwell?”

He wanted to run away. He wanted to enfold her in his arms. He wanted to scream at her; rage at her for leaving him and beg for her forgiveness all at once.

Her eyes flicked up to his forehead again, back to him. Her brows crimped, briefly.

“You’re pale as a sheet. Should I fetch a chirurgeon?”

A dragoon, the Exarch had said, but he could feel the healer’s heart in her as well, could feel his own heart aching in proximity.

“No, no, I am well-“

He scarcely heard his own words, fumbling to master himself before he was lost to memories. He would not, he would *not* break down in the street, and he had to say something to her, anything -

“What is your name?”

“Aurore Kromer de Fortemps, ser. Are...are you a deserter?” She was staring at his forehead again.

His lips quirked in irony. It had not been *he* who ran from the Convocation’s will, no, but he had surely deserted his people. Every step he took since, every failure, every delay to the Rejoining, it was surely all an equal betrayal to those who were sacrificed.

“Something like that.”

“Where have you come from?” She took a step back, her friendly curiosity evaporating.

“Garlemald. Is it not obvious?”

“Don’t toy with me, Garlean. Why are you here? How did you pass the gatekeep?”

Something was wrong. He could see her fingers itching for a weapon, her feet shifting slightly into a battle stance. It was plain she didn’t recognise him – how could she, with her soul distorted as it was? He had to gain her trust somehow. And quickly.

“Speak, Garlean, unless you wish me to take you to the Lord-Commander directly. Were you sent ahead from the main force?”

As ever, he had no recourse but the truth.

“I was looking for you, on behalf of an acquaintance who is...otherwise occupied.”

“A poor excuse. Not one of my friends would send a Garlean bloodhound after me.”

“He didn’t ask me to. I volunteered.”

“Well, your timing is awful. Ishgard is due to fall under Imperial occupation in a matter of days. I was all but sure I was to be passed from one Garlean to another then, so, why now?”

Occupation? This had not been Elidibus’ plan; he had not breathed a word of it. What had changed so abruptly?

“I am not from the army,” he ground out. “No one from Garlemald knows I am here.”

He’d expected more disbelief, perhaps anger. He did not expect a rueful laugh, escaping despite her restraint, and a faint shake of her head.

“Gods, I am hopeless with interrogations. Come along, ser, whether you speak truth or not, you should make yourself known to the Lord-Commander.”

She gripped his wrist – her hands were so small, long fingers delicate, but he sensed their strength all the same – and in desperation he tugged back on his arm and looked her full in the eyes.

“I need to speak to you in private. Only you.”

She stilled utterly in shock, staring at him, her hand still on his arm but loosening its grip. Her lips formed something, words without sound that he could not decipher, before she wet them with a pointed tongue and tried again.

“Have we met before, ser?”

“Ah...not recently. You may call me Hades,” and if it was brazen intimacy to give his true name, at least she did not know it as such.

“I can’t explain,” she murmured, more to herself than to him, “but I believe it.” She seemed to shake herself, and returned to her usual bold tone – and already he was mapping out her voice, damn it. He couldn’t afford distractions –

“You will behave yourself, Ser Hades?”

“Uh,” he offered. He tried to ignore the lump in his throat at the sound of his name on her lips. *Concentrate, you fool.*

She took a step closer again, almost nose to nose with him, and abruptly hissed: “If you make trouble, I’ll kill you myself. This is *my* city.”

He managed to stammer out something like agreement, and it seemed to satisfy her for she was already turning away.

“Wait!”

She turned back towards him. He tried desperately not to think of the last time he had begged her to stay – *don’t leave me don’t leave please* – hells, he needed time alone to master himself, and badly.

“Where shall I find you?”

A wash of hesitation passed over her eyes, so swiftly hidden again that he might have imagined it.

“My home is...busy, right now. Do you have lodgings?”

“No. If you need me, say my name.”

She scowled at him, suspecting some jest, but before she could probe further he held up his hand, palm up, to show her the glyph that lit up there.

“Place your palm on mine – either one, it doesn’t matter – and wherever I am, I’ll hear it.”

He stood there, watching her come to a decision, before she slowly raised her hand. At the contact the glyph pulsed bright before disappearing altogether.

He felt a strong temptation to raise her hand to his lips, as he had seen local nobles do, but she was too quick for him, retrieving her hand as soon as possible.

It was probably for the best, he mused, watching her walk away. He had no business flirting with a doomed Warrior, no matter how her soul resonated. Some wounds could not be healed, and he was a fool to forget that for even a moment.

The glyph was mostly for show, would be entirely pointless under most circumstances, but here it had created a link between them that would withstand whatever was affecting the local aether.

As he followed her, unseen, to her home, his wrist and palm still burned where she had touched him.

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