

Mina (*) wakes up

Credit to Doku Farilem of Excalibur for cowriting

The direction was always the same.

A series of Garlean scientists flit to and fro while Mina rests in a tank of serum, traced through and powered by raw ceruleum. It seeped through their skin, drove itself like needles into their flesh, pinprick sensation dotting their bare skin. Their mouth is covered by a filtration mask, and tubes come from the back of their neck and their limbs, injecting yet more chemical into their body. The scientists take notes, sometimes, talk amongst themselves. Mina, consciously, watches their body in the brew. They are young in this vision, their hair still a ruddy blonde, their shape still asserting itself. Long locks float like seaweed tendrils, swaying lazily.

A scientist has a breakthrough. Mina watches him as he fiddles on with the dials and communicates with another scientist. They are excited. Mina is nervous.

From another room, a Far Eastern relic is brought into the room, something from the Garlean conquest in Doma. It is malevolent, swirling with Umbral aether, a small incensery in which a gnarled seed lies, gripped around with tangled roots. The scientists speak, and they speak again. The script varied and this one was mush in Mina's ears. They pluck the seed.

It is offered to the younger Mina. It is accepted.

And like that, something is growing within them. A familiar headache takes hold of Mina's skull.

They shake out their hair, snowy white locks on the shore of Onokoro. Consorting with Confederate pirates had its advantages, and they were reaping the benefits of their host's rapport. They offer a small, barely perceptible smile towards one of the ones transporting them. "I thank you."

"Don't mention it. Ye helped us out at a rate low as 'ell before, it stands to reason we should return the favour!" a lanky Au Ra, sunkissed and jovial, replies, clapping them on their overly armored shoulder. They barely stir at such a thing, nodding their head ever so slightly. When the pirate releases them, they wander ashore, eyes against the horizon. Making it as far as Onokoro was a simple matter, the settlement the closest to their ultimate goal.

They were a slight thing, a small Au Ra, though that assessment betrayed their remarkable strength. Their hair was long and white, color drained from it, red streaks like blood through the pale lengths. Lithe muscle rippled under their armor, testament to Mina's proper and diligent training as a mercenary. Some might call them cute, which they would say is a fair enough assessment and speak little more on the matter. Yellow eyes were traced with red limbal rings, though the hue was dull from a lack of freshly drank blood. It was their food of choice, though Mina's body still required food proper as well, an irritating thing that they often forgot about. Fortunately, the body didn't seem to have collapsed yet so it seemed like the diet they were following was fine. They would probably have to drink a little before they made their way across the ocean. Their gaze turns away from Onokoro, quietly wondering how much blood was even in a crab. It could wait. They push it from their mind.

They would probably just swim the rest of the way to Hell's Kier. It would cost the least money, and it would leave as small a trail as possible. They rummage around the prepared satchel they had brought, checking the waterproofing. It would hold. They pop the cork on a potion they'd obtained

from the Poisoned Pestle, and submerge as a bubble of air forms around their head. Their armour, made of concentrated willpower, is stripped back to the purest form they can reasonably don while swimming: a simple crimson necklace in the same ornamentation. The armor quite literally melts back into this form, revealing a simple black swimsuit beneath, meant more for athletics than looks. The ocean churns around them as they begin their long, methodical swim.

The potion was necessary for them. They were bad at monitoring function, as far removed from Mina's senses as they were. That included breath. While they could manipulate everything pretty simply— they could, for instance, use a weapon, or speak in their voice— but the finer details of manipulation were a bit beyond their ken. The ability to summon weapons through Mina's Resonance, for instance, was beyond them. Something about that was native to Mina's spirit, not their body. Past that, they were also poorly unaware of Mina's senses, the feeling dulled from being filtered through so many facets. While they could sense them a little, regular checks helped them keep apprised of all things. The fresh scar on their tail from the last time they had hunted was proof enough of that. A fresh gash had opened up on it when they and Zamir had happened upon their mark, and in their frenzy had fought with too little concern for the vessel— a sizable gash had opened up, one they didn't notice in spite of it bleeding for a while. They hoped Mina would forgive them for that.

They continue their swim. They assumed their pace was reasonable. It was a long journey ahead of them, but it was one that was necessary enough, and they could not feel any fatigue from Mina's body. The swim was easily tenable, which allowed their thoughts to drift into eras past.

Smoky rooms and silks draped around an ornate room, an era long since past. The feeling of lips pressed to their shoulder. The sensation of grandeur, of feeling power, of hollow and shallow strength. Aether drifting within and without, blood, pools of the stuff, a revel of emotion and sensation, made for them and them alone.

The feeling that things would never be the same in this state, borrowing this body, with their senses so dim and removed. A wave raps at their skull, a rather strong one. Yet, they feel nothing.

They had to remember to breathe. A tear, even unbidden within, would show no emotion on Mina's face. Even if they wanted to try to show something, they could barely display one. Chatter and consorting with friends of Mina's had shown that much, their mouth almost always rigid and immovable in their hands. Eyes refused to do much more than stay open. They needed to remember to blink to appear ordinary, oftentimes. Many of the autonomous functions Mina's brain provided were being micromanaged by them, and it was a challenge to keep it all straight.

Their control at the time might have been necessary, but this wasn't healthy. Not for either of them. They were liable to run this body into the ground, even as strong as it was, should they lose compassion for it.

Rationally, Mina's friends and coworkers would be concerned over their departure to Kugane as well, though a cursory check through Mina's documents told them that it would draw less questions to 'take a contract' in Bozja, cleaning up Garlean loyalists. A lie, outright. There was no getting around that, but their whole existence as Mina was based on lies of convenience and letting people assume things of them.

They had to remember to breathe. Thoughts swirl within them again, more images of the past. A tombstone, marked with a sole name. Perhaps it was theirs. They could not make it out. Autumn

leaves and cherry blossoms in equal measure looking out over rice paddies, terraformed land. A morning sun, their hand obscuring the rays. Their form, on the tip of their tongue.

Perhaps they were like Mina. Perhaps there was a reason the two of them were so inextricably tied together, their being made a parasite for this Au Ra. Everything they learned about Mina made them wonder if they would have been able to be a better person in the memories they do hold on to.

Those memories, those are unpleasant. Images of laceration. Images of blood raised in a toast, from an ornate jade goblet, inside of the cup stained, the rim caked with the stuff. Ambrosia to their lips, to be sure. Innocent people lured from their homes, exsanguinated for their amusement.

A sharper intake of air. Their head pounded. Mina's heart, possibly. One of the few muscles they still regulated normally under these circumstances.

There was a fascination with Mina within them. Apparently a shared trait. People liked Mina. People apparently liked them as well. How much of this was residual goodwill from their host and how much of it was their own action was a mystery to them. That host, possessed by a spirit from ages long since past, and there was uncertainty around whether Mina gained or lost power from such a thing. That host which wandered into combat zones in spite of being done with war at this point, seeking to level the playing field against people who might have wronged them. That host, wandering, adrift, a sailor without a ship. Holding on to driftwood.

It would hurt if they could remember how to.

They remember to breathe again. They felt no soreness in any of their muscles from the swim, though their assessment of such a thing was pitiful at best. An inward sigh met their assessment. Their grip, it felt like, was waning. Their direct control was assumed during a fugue from a lack of blood, Mina impaired and their faculties minimal.

In fairness, without them, Mina would have starved to death in the snow. Also in fairness, Mina wouldn't be in that situation if not for their influence. But neither of them had much say in that at all, was the thing. Their assuming control would reasonably be seen as a kindness in such a scenario; it was the *only* thing that could be done.

However, Mina's complexes over being prisoner within their own body– those were likely to flare up. There were a good amount of reasons not to linger within them overlong. Where they would head afterwards... they had an idea at any rate. Same place everything that should have been dead went. Lack of knowledge over their own exact parameters made much unknown, though. Not that they hadn't looked. A stop in Doma to visit Mina's ancestral home told only legends of people jumping at shadows. Yokai was the word on their lips, and they had searched, looked plenty far, scoured tomes in Kugane, listened to the oral history from wizened elders. There was some knowledge to be had.

They remember to breathe again. Tales of a bloodsucking tree that grew on the field of battle spring to mind, but... they certainly didn't *feel* like a tree. Though it was hard to say why they bore this feeling. If it was just the will of the shell they inhabited reasserting itself, even a tiny bit, that was something of a source of sorrow. A departure, necessary as it was, was inevitable, and it would happen on that night.

The trustworthy leather of a seat creaked beneath Inago Kitago, the Lalafell checking through all the pre-flight ritual for a familiar airship, the Redwing. The boy was blonde, tall, for a Lalafell at

least, and tan. A cocky smile was usually plastered on his face, emotions clearly written even in spite of his missing eye obscuring half of it. He's dressed down a bit for his surreptitious mission, the Maelstrom reds left at home and a set of armor donned for this one. He cut a striking image in his shiny white coat, a clean white cravat about his neck. A set of vials rattle at his side, part of a toolbox given by his sole passenger.

He breathed out inside his little cockpit, remembering to focus. These nights were some of the few he didn't drink, the moments before a flight he had to take point on. Systems were engaged, the ship was appropriately geared, safeties checked. It was in good condition, or at least as good a condition as the ship could be, slightly too low passages lined with industrial pipe, the ship twice retrofitted for new purposes.

The ship's interior was military and far from opulent, all unpainted metal with exposed pipes and such lining the ceilings, some light fixtures flickering errantly, but it was plenty spacious. The airship was a repurposed cargo ship refitted first as military vessel and then again as an exploratory vessel for the Free Company's pursuits, and the series of retrofitting it showed—much of the ship's bones were still there, and when the mechanics had ripped out the guns to clear it with Grand Company standards, it was a bit of a slipshod job. Still, there was a private room, a latrine, sets of hammocks in the bay, and ample space to lug whatever cargo needed. There were no exposed pointy bits, and below decks were properly pressurized.

He had with him a single passenger, one Doku Farilem, or rather, Deau and Edera. That all was a bit much for poor Inago's head, but he at least understood that he was, for now at least, dealing with Doku rather than her draconic alter. The elezen lady had hair like cotton candy, soft blue and pink, done up in an ornately fastened ponytail, but more notable were the pair of black horns protruding from either side of her head, marks of her own troubles and travails. That head was poked into the cockpit, observing Inago's work. "You left your plan only halfway explained."

Inago snorts in self-derision. "Aye, that's because I've only half a plan. Whether or not stuff'll work proper is gonna be a total shiteshow, lass, an' you'll 'ave front row seatin'."

Doku gives a pensive hum. "Perhaps you'll just have to hope things are like Zamir said then. That everything happens for a reason?"

"Cor, sure hope so. Take a seat an' buckle up, lass, I hafta pay attention t' this," Inago answers, brow knit with focus. He directs his attention again on the consoles, starting to flip switches and make things run the way they ought to. He's contemplative, an odd face for the Lalafell, and resolved. That one is more common for his visage, nothing if not confident in his actions. He gives one final sigh, and scratches at the side of his face, steeling himself to carry out this task.

The books weren't written for this one. It was more of a whim, really. Willow, the boss's boss, would probably forgive him for this relative indolence if it was to bring back their officer. Besides that, plenty of people that he was leaving in Eorzea knew he had this plan. Zamir, Yazul and Tessa at least, just... none of the people that knew actually talked regularly to too many of the folks that owned the Redwing.

It didn't really matter at the end of the day. He would make this journey on foot if he had to. Having the Redwing to do it was just more convenient in the long run anyway, and what was the matter anyway: he was a pirate at heart, soul blazing bright. The Admiral herself could tell him to stand down and he'd throw his coat on the floor. Mina needed to come home, and their parasite, if

that's what they insisted on being called, couldn't meet their end yet. Their friends needed them, he needed to know that they could look after their friends and their friends could look after them. And Twelve a-fucking-bove, someone needed to shout at them, both of them, for being so goddamn stupid.

He let out a short bark of laughter. He calls back, "Mina an' the one inside 'em. They're an awful lot alike, ain't they? Both tryin' to solve every little problem they have all on their own."

Doku's lips twitch into a smile, one of apparent camaraderie in that state of affairs. "Seems so."

He engaged the thrust, and flew towards the Ruby Sea.

The script varied every time.

A series of Garlean scientists flit to and fro while Mina rests in a tank of serum, traced through and powered by raw ceruleum. It seeped through their skin, drove itself like needles into their flesh, pinprick sensation dotting their bare skin. Their mouth is covered by a filtration mask, and tubes come from the back of their neck and their limbs, injecting yet more chemical into their body. The scientists take notes, sometimes, talk amongst themselves. "Subject 083 is in so many ways the perfect test subject, aren't they? They're like... a beautiful canvas, ready to be sculpted into a glorious monument to Garlemald by Head Scientist Hyginus."

"They certainly have a propensity for malleability. How easily their aether slid towards Umbral... it's interesting. Perhaps it's a predilection for the stuff."

Mina, consciously, watches their body in the brew. They are young in this vision, their hair still a ruddy blonde, their shape still asserting itself. Long locks float like seaweed tendrils, swaying lazily.

A scientist has a breakthrough, entering the room from the back. "Head Scientist Hyginus has a new revelation! A recent discovery in savage territory might be just the thing we need to get Project Oversoul off to an excellent start."

"This is about that seed, isn't it? From Doma. Where we found 083 and so many of the other subjects," the one he was talking to said, casting a glance in Mina's direction.

"That would seem to be the case! It reeks of the same aether this savage does. The two should be perfectly compatible. We can study it, then. The surfeit of Umbral aether seeping from this subject should be a match for compatibility... and if it is rejected, well, all things in the name of science! From there, Pertinax..." he is drowned out by an ominous, monotone thrumming crashing through their head, ringing high and clarion through their horns. Shortly after, Mina's gaze follows the next intruder to their research pod.

From another room, a Near Eastern relic is brought into the room, something from the Garlean conquest in Doma. It is malevolent, swirling with Umbral aether, a small incensery in which a gnarled seed lies, gripped around with tangled roots. "It can be implanted in them? No, the seed longs for a host, does it not? If presented with something viable, it will take root itself." They pluck the seed.

It is offered to the younger Mina. It is accepted. For a moment, all is still.

And like that, something is growing within them, and this time they feel they can almost hear a voice, their own, but not their own. A familiar headache takes hold of Mina's skull.

It was a shame. They felt as though they had almost reached some kind of conclusion, they thought, as they slipped again into unconsciousness.

Soaked with water, they stepped out on the shore of Hell's Kier. They assessed their limbs. There was some soreness, certainly, but the journey overall left them fully functional. Next, they checked for bruising or any other such imperfection on their borrowed flesh. It seemed alright. There were no gashes or any noticeable welts. It would be another long swim, this time deeper into the ocean when it was necessary. For now, it made sense to get some rest. They sat down on the rocky pier, the warmth of the obsidian below them heating their body through. In truth, the exacts of how it was they meant to sever their tether to Mina were imperfect, but they knew enough. A Kojin relic from back in the day, fashioned from adamantite, the hilt of a katana, lay under Hell's Kier. According to legend, the Spiritbreaker Murasame was used back in the day by Kojin warriors to ward off evil spirits from possessing the bodies of those they love. When swung, it would forge a blade of aether, cutting only on the spirit realm and excising malevolent spirits from those being possessed. It seemed fitting enough, and they had done enough research into whether or not this relic had ever been recovered. A long visit to Sharlayan before heading to Othard was the trick for that, and a lot of incessant badgering stuffy academics about the current whereabouts of this blade certainly helped them discover the truth of it. As best as they could tell, this blade was either an old myth, or still there and waiting to be uncovered.

But they knew, of course, that it was the latter. They had seen fellow yokai fall to that Kojin blade before, lives reasserted to the control of their original owners. At the time, it was horrifying for them, watching the end of things greeting spirits. But now they looked at it as a sort of solace. An end to things seemed like it would be a kinder fate for a many centuries old leech.

More things drift back. A snowy, white haired Au Ra, legs crossed atop a throne of wood, high backed with gorgeous red flowers woven into the lattices around it. They trail down to the ground, a shallow moat about the bottom of the throne, a pool of blood. The flowers are the same hue, a deep, vivid crimson. They sip blood from a jade mug, a cocky grin on their face. All of it was wholly for show. They ruled nothing, but a Yokai in a body like this was capable of everything. Perhaps, one could say, they were the monarch of *all* things. Certainly, their power was delectable, overwhelming, and deeply, deeply intoxicating.

The beautiful thing about power is that once you had some of it, there would be people that actually tried to stop you— and when they did, once you won... and you always won, have you seen yourself? It was simple to assimilate their power. A vicious loop of beautiful, greedy gain. The goal, as ever, was to live forever. If the world would only take from them, then the world was theirs to take and use.

A smile, soft, quirked at their lips thinking about it. To live forever, no, to reign forever, just meant watching everything you thought you knew would last forever wither away to dust in your grasp, to leave you when you were no longer viable. It wasn't a cycle of things forever gaining. They saw the rise of things, sure.

But mortals took, and took, and eventually they overcame them. Their throne was splintered, their body lost, their spirit, all they were, bound within a gnarled black seed.

They focused on that moment. How it felt. To be exorcised, an onmoyoji working to extract them from the body they had snatched, spirit bound in a vessel and sealed so many times. To have so much taken from them, their body, their blood, their throne, their legacy shattered in an instant and lost to history. There would be no record of them, just a Yokai forced to live an eternity in this accursed incensery.

The moments faded smoothly into eternities. They do not know when they stopped feeling.

They do, however, remember the feeling of being given. The three that worked at the apothecary... to offer blood, without expectation of reciprocity. Or even acceptance of the offer for reciprocity, once they were the one that moved the limbs. It made something stir within them, the need to protect, the need to feel something. That feeling drove their actions for the rest of their stay in Eorzea, and it drove them to re-examine the way they treated vessels past.

Only with Mina did they realize how sluggish and imperfect their control over a host really was. Certainly, exceptional hosts were more of a joy to inhabit than slothful ones, and they surely had a type that clicked better. Bodies closer to the one they bore when they had a body of flesh were more familiar, more nimble in their hands. And certainly, their ability was available within any host. Claws of aether, hide of hewn bark, eyes to pierce darkness, all tricks of war and murder to fit a Yokai.

But still they could barely manage a smile. A laugh sounded tinny and fake from their lips, so they simply didn't try. A frown when insulted was almost impossible to muster. They may have been power, but it was a single-minded focus towards war and bloodshed, and it drained the body they inhabited to do it. Past vessels were used and discarded like shed skins of a snake. They had moved from one to the next, battered and bruised bodies discarded after they served their purposes. And this time, they worried deeply what would happen to Mina if they departed, implanted so as they were. Past possessions tended to end poorly for the hosts once they left, and embedded so as they were to Mina, a leaving would likely prove fatal.

Thinking was depressing. Lingered on it was worse, when their sins were so clearly returning to their mind. They pushed their hands against the obsidian of Hell's Kier and tested the bubble about their head. It would not last for the extent of their excursion. They popped the cork on another vial, avail themselves again of their armor so they would sink faster, and dive back into the drink. To their understanding, there was a cavern beneath the waves— that was their target next.

As Mina dove, an airship alit upon a landing in Onokoro, someone who had every right to be there and a very nosey lalafell departing the Redwing. Inago was dressed to impress other pirates, his eye patch glittering with gold ornamentation and his ears adorned with mysterious jewels which were very probably looted from one of his many excursions. The elezen too does her best to fit in among other pirates, dressed in an eye-catching coat. Both watch for just a moment as the ocean catches the sun's rays with each wave. Doku commented, "The Ruby Sea is a fitting name."

"Aye, 'tis," Inago agreed, jamming his thumbs in his pockets and looking to the east. Pinks and vibrant reds traced the cresting waves, and Inago let out a wistful sigh. "Cor, it's beautiful. Reminds me a' when I was young, takin' in my first breaths a' the ocean... but there ain't too much time to delay," he said, setting off at a stomping jog down the stairs, pace easily matched by Doku's lengthy strides. "Alright, let's split up, aye? Ye 'ave my Linkpearl in case ye need to 'ave 'old of me... better to chat up a few folks an' get a more complete picture a' things."

Doku hummed in agreement. "Best of luck, Inago."

"Aye, best of luck, lass," he said, and the two part ways on the sand of the seashore, Inago splitting to the right. Eliminating places Mina hadn't been would probably wind up being easier than trying to properly track them down based on only a hunch that they were here.

Heaven-on-High was right out as a potential destination, as trodden as it was by pirates. The upper reaches weren't nearly as tread on, but Inago doubted even Mina would be insane enough to try to brave that place without help. Just to be sure, he asked the person in charge of allowing errant outsiders entry, and was assured that no, he had allowed no such Auri entrance recently. He advised Inago to try the fishing fleets, since they'd not been seen in Onokoro. Perhaps one of the fishermen had spotted them off the coast.

He arrives at the prescribed spot to find Doku in the midst of a discussion with a fisherman, and from the apparent look of the fisherman, Doku would get what she wanted sooner rather than later.

"Pay? Why should I pay?" she asked, a low chuckle accentuating the inquiry.

"Well, ah, finder's fee, miss. You understand, there haven't been all too many paying the Ruby Tithe, and you folks with airships and all are really cutting into our bottom line, and..."

"Is there really such an issue? You and I are just having a lovely little chat is all," Doku's eye flashed a bright blue, and her next words are an imposing snarl. "Where is the snowy haired Au Ra?"

"S-saw them swimming to Hell's Kier!" he stammers out, clapping his hands over his mouth after he says it, and Doku wheels back on her feet to spot Inago at the section of pier connected to the beach.

"Sooner then, aye?" Inago said, answering the question in his head. Doku still maintained some of her fury, moving with quick paced towards the airship again.

"Of all the— Mina swam across the Ruby Sea," she growled.

Inago paused for a second, then realized that was insane, in that moment. "Cor, 'ang on!" he yelps, hurrying and sprinting to match pace.

Deeper and deeper still, they sank. They counted the moments that passed by as they descended corpse-like to the bottom of the ocean. Three-hundred and four. Three-hundred and five. They peered at the ocean, now rock as they sight the bottom. Legend told of a submerged cavern at the bottom of Hell's Kier where Kojin warriors of eld laid their brethren to rest. That was their expectation of where the blade would be held. Delving texts from long past eras at the Noumenon had proved very fulfilling in that regard. They had come across a particularly enlightening book of stories from ages long since past in a restricted part of the library, transcriptions of oral history: tales of Kojin braves fighting wars against an army of Yokai. The writing was such that there was some possible deniability that such could have just been tall tales for children, and certainly, the embellishment indicated such.

Three hundred ninety-seven. Three hundred ninety-eight. The bottom was in sight. Though the tales might have become children's fables, they could sense hints of truth in them, little details about things that were so close to their memory. Things like the ways the Kojin prepared for a fight, the

particulars of the weaponry they availed themselves of, the descriptions of other Yokai they had toiled against. They had always been just out of reach, a few layers of deceit too deep. If ever they showed their face, it was to meet someone's last moments with scythe and fang.

They reminded themselves to cease their self-congratulation. They had been subdued eventually. Obviously. Four hundred twenty-five. Four hundred twenty-six. Their feet touched the bottom of the ocean on uncertain terrain, peering around the depths of the ocean with crystal in hand. They traced the patterns of the rock wall around them, peering up at the light now so far away. Around them is the sound of the depths, dully crashing around the bubble around their horns. They were thankful that Doku is such a competent alchemist. The potion worked beyond their expectations.

Their hand caught on a small seam in the rock wall. Nearly imperceptible, but surely there. They push their eyes to it. There was no luminance from within, but this was the place that had been spoken of.

It was fortunate that they had come prepared for such an occasion. In the bottom of their satchel, a breach charge was stored, one they remembered their alter had asked a lot of inquiries about. Mina had told Zaber it was to verify the exact parameters for verification with La Noscean law, but in reality it was so they could concoct tactics with the exact parameters in mind. The explosive was small, and waterproof, and damn strong, a little package of putty wrapping a casing of fire crystals. They armed it against the wall, swimming back a distance.

The wall bursts in a cacophony of bubbles and muted fury, the chasm sporting a new hole for their endeavour. There was no major tectonic shift, but their goal had certainly been accomplished, and at the bottom of the Kier there certainly were caverns. Now that they got a better look inside, with a broader view, there was a hint of red light within, a promise of molten earth. They would have to be careful, but they believed that they would be able to match the environment. It was unfortunate, perhaps, that their monitor of their own body was quite so lacking. If the heat was getting to Mina, it would be a thing they couldn't really fix. For now, at least, they emerged in the humid cavern air, their armor of will matching the climate. The steel plates become a lightweight vest in the same pattern, their faults an armored skirt. The swimwear they had on as well was light enough to keep cool enough to survive. They surveyed the new terrain.

Magma lines streak through the bottom of a vast cavern of craggy obsidian, glowing vibrantly with heat. Flowing lava streaks across the side of the room, the heat emanating from it enough already to make them sweat, sticking against the edges of their scales. Pillars of stone jut up through the fumes, keeping the cavern propped up, and wicked looking beasts, fiery snakes and elementals popping out of the lava, hides charred with flame and stone prowl the inhospitable climate.

They peer further. A structure lay at the end of the way, a shrine, probably ages old. It bore resemblance to Kojin settlements, though the aged stone was crumbling. Hopefully such would be the location they sought. From their back, they draw their scythe, a familiar implement. It is brandished with a flourish, and they charge in.

Above the surface, the duo in pursuit of Mina alit on Hell's Kier. Inago peered around, stretching out his body after spending another small while in the cockpit. "Cor, that seat's comfy an' all but... way I hafta move my limbs just isn't totally what I want," he groused.

"Now, if I were an ages-old spirit inhabiting the body of an Au Ra, and looking to shuffle off this mortal coil, why would I be at Hell's Kier?" Doku wondered aloud. Inago cast a glance in her direction.

"Ain't exactly sure but I'm thinkin' the answer might be further inland? The shore is fine but I'm feelin' like whatever thing it is they're after is, well, old."

"And the shore would have already been picked clean, is that your logic?" Doku supposed. "Interesting theory, but the answer needs to be below the waves. They bought those potions from Solana for a reason, Inago."

"Ah, cor, yer right... I guess we're just divin', aye? Takin' a chance on it?"

"If you have a better option, I'll hear it. Clock's ticking."

Inago answered by rooting around the boxes Doku had brought aboard with her, two heavy wooden crates full of all sorts of alchemical goodies. "Ye have potions fer heat stroke, aye? And, err... makin' fire less a concern?"

Doku rolled her eyes, heading over to assist. "Box on your right, about two layers down," she advised, and quickly found the bright red potions, handing Inago one and pocketing the other. "Breathing Bubbles are the top layer in the other. Medicinal supplies are here..." she muttered, and plucked from a small box within the other boxes a small selection of vials, those kept for herself.

By the time she is done, there's a small selection of potions on either of their belts, enough for most foreseeable circumstances the pair might reasonably come across and a few that they might not. Inago wasn't sure exactly why he might need antivenin, but it was certainly better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it. Esuna was a potent spell, but Inago worked a lot better with visible space and things than things he had to peer into aether for. Still, there was hopefully enough competency in him to do what it was he was hoping to do.

He retrieved the starglobe from his back. "Say, lass, do ye believe in fate?" He peers within the starglobe, brilliant vistas of light playing out inside its rings.

Doku tilted her head at him, fixing him with a deadpan stare. "Really? You're asking that now? Not the flight over?"

"Erm, aye ...was just sommat I was thinkin' about," Inago answered sheepishly, stowing it again just as quickly and heading towards the drink. He pops the cork on his vial of Breathing Bubbles and dives as it begins to form, Inago's method of swimming nimble and fast, the Lalafell taking to water like a shark— and in times before he was cursed with his weapon, that might not have been so incorrect a comparison.

Doku is right behind him, and as the pair descend, Inago is left thinking about the exact circumstances of the curse. He had obtained a weapon during one of his pirate excursions and the thing had become sort of a part of him. He struggled for the specifics Zamir had told him. The weapons were Mhach artifacts, sure. They numbered ten in total, but the daggers were a match set so altogether, there were actually nine, all of them from different disciplines, and all of them cursing the pirate crew with the inability to use other weapons.

However, in exchange, the weapons felt alive. At least, that's how Inago felt. His starglobe gave him abilities far beyond the power he reasonably ought to be able to manage, advanced astrology that Mina had to study for years to obtain replicated by simply wanting it.

They were frustrated, at the time, but eventually came around on it. "That's an impressive find, Inago. You'd do well to keep it safe."

"This thing feels impossible, boss," Inago had grouched, the pitch of the training grounds beneath his feet. Mina, dressed down in combat fatigues, stands beside him in his freshly pressed and never before worn robes, a gift from Mina. They had reasoned that if he felt more like an Astrologian, perhaps it would help his studies. Inago remembered taking the book he was given and flipping through it until he could find sections with pictures. The text talked about all sorts of things in words that he couldn't understand, not exactly, all of it swimming together in his vision and blurring. It blended together. Inago was dumb, he knew that. But at least the pictures were something to look at.

"Hardly impossible. Just tricky is all," Mina said, taking up their own stance. "You're used to swinging around a massive blade, right? The orrery, in comparison, is a weightless weapon. You propel it... well, I, at least, propel it through aetherial manipulation and attunement. How you propel yours is..."

"I dunno. Jus' happens," Inago provided, drawing his own starglobe. His stance was technically awful, and Mina made sure to kneel down to adjust his limbs so it was better, but his orrery stayed perfectly aloft, as though it was used by an ageless master of the craft. "Pretty much anything what I've done with this thing jus' happens."

Mina furrowed their brow, weaving together the magicks together for an Earthly Star. "Can you mimick th—" by the time the question was even formed, Inago copied the technique perfectly, the star precisely formed and shimmering with internal radiance. It was beautiful to behold, really. A masterful display of an ancient technique.

"Aye, seems like," Inago nodded.

"How did you do that?"

"I dunno. Ye wanted t' make a Heavenly Star or what 'ave ye, ye did a sort of kneelin' motion like pchooo!" and Inago mimicks the motion again with his starglobe out, "an' the thing just sorta made itself. Why, is it bad?"

"No, it's... remarkably perfect," Mina answered, irritation creeping into their tone. They go through this process a few times with a few different techniques, and Inago managed each spell with a power far above his technical skill— which was to say, none.

By the end of it, Inago seems kind of in awe of the orrery floating above his hands. "...the hell is goin' on with this thing?" he asked.

"I don't have an answer for that. But, if it's your lot in life to be an exceptionally talented Astrologian, that's hardly a rough one," Mina noted with a petite laugh.

Inago frowned a bit. "Gonna make my pirate tales a lot less thrillin', boss. 'An then I sat in the back an' hucked a ball a' starlight! Then I did it again! Folks'll eat that up, aye?"

"You lack imagination," Mina critiqued. "Astrology is a varied field with a number of techniques, and it's malleable. Techniques can blend into one another– forms aren't rigid once you've ample mastery. Diurnal magicks and nocturnal magicks can bleed into each other, yes? I, for instance, root much of my magic in Hingan Geomancy, so it's a multiplicitous field. It might even be possible you and that starglobe create new techniques."

"...ye really think someone like me could do that?" Inago wondered aloud. "Thought that sorta stuff takes a particular type a' scholar. Them Sharlayan fancy coats."

"From what I can tell, the rules don't apply to you," Mina answered simply. "You operate more on force of will than anything else. Here, this book is some of the latest stuff I've read, experimental Astrology fresh off the press at Old Sharlayan. I'm not entirely through it, but some of the theory and such has already made its way into my own technique. Really, the particulars of how they manipulate aether is truly fascinating! Never would have–"

Inago blinked, staring at the offered tome. It was a thick thing, the size of his head and then some, the first half dog eared and worn through. Clearly it was well-used by Mina, they had notated plenty about it. But in Inago's mind, there wasn't really any chance he would ever read the damn thing.

So when he found himself perched in the Maelstrom reading room at one of the tables, poring over the tome, not a week later, he was perhaps a little surprised. Maybe it was boredom. That's a fair assessment, but it wasn't really a deep examination of the text as much as a cursory scan through to look at all the pretty pictures. Say what you might about Astrology, the stuff did have occasional uses. He'd heard the ship's navigator talk intermittently about using the stars to guide the way, and as Inago pondered over one of the star charts in the book he could see the connections. That slotted in pretty logically, at least in his mind. He scanned over other sections. Mina had mostly made their way through in order, but they had gone to a particular section later in the book and marked it up a bit more than any of the others, even, including the stuff that they had espoused knowledge of. He flips through it a bit, and understands why. He isn't a great reader, but a few words stuck out, names of places he remembered going a few times before. Doman, Hingan, Othardian– this was some of the stuff that mixed disciplines, he wagered. And since Mina was Doman, it made sense they would look into the magicks from scholars of their nation. "But what does it feckin' mean!?" Inago cried out, trying to sound out some of the harder words and failing dramatically. Ayeetheerohmatick? That took him ten seconds to pronounce and he didn't have the foggiest idea what it meant!

The pictures were pretty, was what he decided. One of them shows a figure on a meadow, lines drawn between them and a number of objects in said meadow– the grass, the stone, the earth beneath. The sun above is drawn to as well. He flipped the page again, another mysterious and inscrutable piece of art on it, a depiction of a very tall and very pretty lady dressed in ancient looking costume, holding a divination card. He kinda recognized that one, the lady in that picture was from one of his cards. The red one! "The Ba– Balan... Balance?" he sounded out, nodding. That was a word! But why was it a proper one? Must be some sort of Astrology thing.

The next one was a fascination. It was a stone, connected to a wispy looking spirit, as well as an artfully rendered wave of sand within an hourglass behind it all, frozen in the middle of a stream. Well, obviously. It was a picture. He actually took the time to read this one: some sort of miracle method to save a life on death's door. It sounded insane, honestly, but he was interested in the implications of it, and it did get published in a major tome. Mina's notation next to the spell is a simple one: 'requires knowledge of Sharlayan techniques I haven't mastered– see pg. 935.' Inago stared at

the picture. Something about it was odd, and made him think about things a bit deeper. The soul was being tethered, but the how wasn't precise. He scanned the passages. "Strong bonds... tethers to Hydaelyn," he read, thumbing at his chin. "So... those work as... like, an anchor. An' mean the boat doesn't try t' drift away any more?"

When Inago and his crew bested the ten-armed, nine-weaponed, half-skulled skeleton at the bottom of that dank shrine, there were nine proper weapons, each ancient and timeless, a pristine piece of work hewn from majestic white stone, flawlessly shaped. It was as though they had been simply imagined in the ways they were, never touched by a pair of mortal hands. Without word, the venturing crew approaches one of them each, their old weapons put away. Inago would grouse about the daggers after then, but there was something about the orrery that spoke to him. Maybe it was his respect for Mina, maybe the magnanimity inside him lent better to a starglobe than a giant sword, maybe he just thought it looked the prettiest. It was still the one he approached. Maybe, he supposed, arms working to swim deeper and deeper, that was fate.

Perhaps there was something written in the stars for a knucklehead like him, after all.

They ducked.

It was really all they could do, in such a scenario. The serpents had caught the scent of blood in the air from the first of the lava-encrusted armadillos they had fought, and once things got a little too loud, of course the elementals wanted to silence the magic flowing through their air. It meant that there was a fracas, so when an elemental launched a fireball at their face, well... they ducked.

It really had turned into something of a rondo, with Mina unfortunately at the center of it all. Scythe was being jammed every which way, the end of its long pole shoved into a beast's eye there, the blade slicing through a serpent beside them, hilt used to ward off a blow. They resisted the urge to go berserk, hoping that their faculties and presence of mind would be a better method of keeping them safe. No telling what lay further inside, be it a greater foe or a test of some ilk.

So they ducked, sidestepped, and wove their way through the fracas, a deadly dancer skirting the edge of danger. Scythe is manipulated just so, tooth and claw clashing against each other as they flit through the combat, hoping they can evade it altogether and just put their assailants against each other. It would just take a moment's opening, and they found it— a brief moment and a portal is traversed. They sheathed their scythe, walking a few paces ahead to distance themselves from the brawling enemies and the scent of blood.

Their control was waning, certainly. Advanced techniques were more taxing on the body, they noticed, though their strength was just as good as before. They had to wonder if it was age and atrophy at this point. It wouldn't matter soon anyway. Their destination was just across another little atoll in the magma. The brawl continues behind them, and they leave it in their trail, advancing forward across the atoll— but not expecting it to move. Their reply is quick, a new portal made to traverse backwards. Their jaw clenches as they land again on solid ground, gazing at their new adversary. It was easy to see how they could have mistaken this for a path onwards. A hide mottled with scars and lit from within, shook off magma as it drew to its full height. It was a serpent, with many eyes that glow white like embers in a fresh fire, scales deep crimson, golden yellow and shining black like dark jewels, magma seeping from gnarled ports on its back, like gills taking the stuff in. Its mouth is just as sharp and jagged as the rock it's modeled off, asymmetrical shards like glass and brimstone jutting up from its jaw.

They clench their hand down on their scythe. Large foes like this usually moved a little slow, but the way it coiled and moved, like a finger on a trigger, made them well aware of how fast this serpent could strike if needed. It had size. It might end up thinking it had speed, if they played their cards right, but it wouldn't ever have power. This couldn't help but to show its fangs, but they had only displayed a fraction of their true strength. If all things wound up well, they wouldn't have to. Such a thing would likely tax Mina's body to the breaking point.

Therefore, it couldn't come to that. A swift and brutal assault after feigned weakness was the plot that they contrived, and they dropped their stance, shifting their weight just so. The serpent was well aware of the gaps in their stance, and it struck like the crack of a whip. They were well prepared, leaping up atop the strike. They wreathed themselves in Umbral aether, spiked, thorny claws overlaid atop their hands, skin hardening into chitinous flesh. If it was destruction they would bring, then they would be its seraph. Claw struck hide. It was like striking a geode with an explosive, the claw tearing into the stone with reckless fervor. Their eyes widen at the carnage, a grin forming on their face.

In moments like these, the power of their body and their soul was most connected. They drive the other claw in, raking talon across flesh as the snake reels back from its assault, fresh, warm blood staining their hands as they do.

Assessment of the combat during landed blows was pivotal. One wound was good, but hardly enough to take down something like this, and what they did next would be decisive. They knew that one major blow to them meant it would be unlikely for them to be able to hold anything back, so ideally, they would never get hit. The momentum from the snake lurching back was used as they predicted the snake's next assault: presumably the tail would lash out towards them, and they're mostly correct. There's a spray of lava accompanying the crash of the tail, and with the momentum and a bit of applied force, they manage to soar up and over the spray of lava.

A nearby pillar in the lava was close enough that they could latch to it, trailing their feet across it for a moment and using it to course correct. They launched themselves back at the serpent, wreathed in malevolent aether. There was an audible crack as they impacted, cratering the back of the serpent's scales, gashes opening up as the metallic hide digs into flesh. What they didn't manage to predict is the projectile spout of lava flowing out from the creature's back, one of those craggy pores. It arced towards them, and while they were fast enough to weave a quick ward to dissuade the hit, it's not quite enough to absorb it completely. Consciously, they realized the blow was burning Mina's flesh alive, but they feel little of the crippling pain that would ordinarily accompany such a thing. They clenched their jaw, slam their scythe down into the beast's flesh, and prepare to dodge again as the beast makes to again submerge in the lava. A swift manoeuvre of their scythe was enough to get them back to solid land, sliding back a bit, just away from the lava splashing against the obsidian ground.

From within themselves they called forth more of their accursed magic. Splintering flesh jutted out with creeping vines of spectral corruption, wreathing them fully in a cocoon of vines and spirit magic, as though they were in the center of a corded mass of crimson red thorns, larger and larger still. The serpent tried an assault as their power grew, but found its assault stopped by a raised fist, swinging up with uncharacteristic swiftness. Their shell of energy was far quicker than it had right to be, but this cowering was something they couldn't hope to maintain for long without the strain on Mina's body becoming too great. It was even causing them a little pain, a prickling gnaw at their flesh.

Their magic complete, they loomed over the cavern, a stories tall spiritual projection with them as the center point. Their body was made of corded vines of ghostly energy, their arms thickly

built of the same gnarled stuff and coming to end in long, sharp claws. About their waist, an ominous brace like bone wreathed their body, and their limbs were braced and traced up lengthwise with the same stuff, jagged forms completing them. The base of their form spooled out and ended in wisps. Their face, or where it should have been, was featureless and fragmented outwards, geometric forms lit from within by crimson light. From within, shrouded in a cocoon of the spectral vines, they grimaced. It was time to finish this.

Meanwhile, swimming hurriedly to the bottom of the ocean, Inago was feeling a little of the strain. During his shore leave it wasn't like he was doing nothing, but swimming down at a sprint's pace as the ocean wants to crush your body, that was a bit different. But his bravado would mean nothing if he didn't follow through. He made his way to the bottom of the ocean, planting his feet against the gnarled stone below, and looked around. Doku is right after him, and Inago pointed to a fresh hole in the wall, sloping into an underground cavern. She nodded assent, the two swimming towards it, taking a moment to quaff relevant potions to enhance their parameters. They hurriedly rounded the corner and sight the cavern the passenger had before, the fracas at their feet and further in the cavern, this veritable kaiju battle, the red-wreathed Mina-but-not staring down a serpent made of fire.

Inago's jaw, at least, dropped, though it was the kind of awestruck that spurred him to action. Doku managed to keep more composure, barking a simple order: "break through these." Doku's bow was drawn, a set of arrows knocked to fan out and attack indiscriminately, as Inago weaves a glyph in front of him, timing the release just so. As Doku launched her volley, Inago released the ward, his magic accelerating the arrows to searing bolts of lightning quick energy, veering towards targets and piercing them through in triplicate.

A small smirk was on Inago's face, and he nodded. "Aye. Not sure what the 'ell is goin' on over there, but we won't know 'til the small fries are taken down. Keep a healthy distance but don't stop firin'!"

In the distance, limb clashed against fang, the enormous spectre absorbing more and more of the serpent's quick blows. One after another, the serpent struck against the comparatively just-slower opponent, but each strike was weathered in due course as they searched for an opening. Finally, they saw one, the serpent's head reared back for a moment, mouth open wide, and fist was jammed inside, against the serpent's inner flesh, searing blood seeping into and through the wreathed aether. They twisted their hand, cutting into the beast just a little before they retracted it, just as it snapped shut. If they wanted to win this duel, they would need to be one step ahead in force and pace. They keep eyes on the snake, now slithering cautiously about the edge of the cavern, waiting for another opening.

Doku and Inago picking at the brawl meant it ceased being about the various factions of animals and beasts scrabbling for territorial control and started being about a unified force ousting these adventurers. Inago has laid down a series of starlight mines in front of the path, columns of piercing celestial light flaring up whenever a claw sets foot on it, blasting them upwards. Doku stood just in front of him, her shots ever true and stopping power fierce, and an elemental stepped too close was dealt with. Too close for Doku to properly line up a shot, the off-hand was brought to bear directly into its face. She gripped and clamped, a claw tearing it off as she snarled.

Up ahead, the snake finally found what it thought was the mark. It lunged towards the body of the being of energy, right towards their cocoon. They swat the lunge away with a brutal swing, the snake still barreling in from the side. A quick step backwards in the blink of an eye means the snake

does not find its purchase, and they grip at it then and there, right arm's tendrils coiled around and claw digging in as anchor.

Exertion and strong grip required excessive force. Their claws are brought to bear again, jabbing them in an unearthly tempo, perforating its neck, through and through. Blood sears the ground, and the snake stops moving finally, and they release the cowering, staggering with exertion. Mina's body was unaccustomed to that kind of strain, but much to their credit, though blood swam at the edges of their vision, they still stood. Other hosts would have fallen unconscious.

They couldn't spare more time. An extended stay inside them at this point would probably kill Mina, with the way they were fraying the edges of their scales. Their single-minded focus drove them onwards, to the exclusion of other things as their heart thudded in their horns. They can still manage the trek towards the end of the path, towards this classically Kojin shrine. It was, as they had predicted, a tomb, one which they were tracking blood into. They clench their fist, still willing themselves onwards.

Doku and Inago, from their distance, saw the winning blows, and saw that the cowering stopped, but lost Mina over the corpse of the snake in the way. "Lass, we've got t' pick up the pace!" Inago called, scanning the horizon. Dozens of elementals, gnarled hides made of obsidian and cracked magma, still lurch out of the lava, drawn by fresh aether and reckless spellcasting. There were more of them at this point than there were beasts, though the pair had certainly left a fine set of corpses of that ilk as well. "Cor, how many of these feckin' things *are* there!?"

"We need to advance. We get far enough away from these things and they should lose interest in us!" Doku called, stashing her bow.

"Cor, lass, it's like a wall! How do we get past them?" Doku grimaced, revealing a well-kept secret. Wings, black as night and darkly draconic, unfurled from Doku's back. The further down they go, they illuminate with a red light, not unlike the magma in the caverns. A powerful beat of her wings to test their ability sounds through the cavern, the force almost enough to send Inago keeling over. Inago took a moment to stare, again dumbstruck, before yelping, "Well / can't do that!"

She grabbed him by the waist, wings beating as the both of them were picked up off their feet. On the question of how to get through, Doku's answer was over.

They traced the headstones of the Kojin, staining them with blood in their observation. They had descended a few flights of stairs, landing in a small circular chamber with a set of tombs on the walls, each another Kojin warrior's, all buried with their weapons. They landed on one particular one. "This... this is it," they said, a finality setting in their heart alongside the pain. The stone lid of the tomb was cast aside, and their eyes land on the implement that they had struggled to put here so long ago, now in their grasp once again. "Spiritbreaker Murasame. Just... just like that day," they breathed out, feeling the weight of it in their hand. Decidedly light. They collapsed against the tomb, pushing a hand to their forehead, other gripping the hilt still. Wet splashed against their cheek, and whether it was a tearstain or a bloodstain, they couldn't say.

That time, so long ago, it was a tearstain. They had given their love a kiss, everything so pleasantly put together as they bid her best of luck in war. She was a warrior, and they the chieftain's child. The war would allow her to earn her spot as the best warrior of them, and finally, the two could wed. It was a silly thing she had said once, but now it seemed as though that was her will.

But she had fallen, then. And in their grief, they had attracted Yokai spirits, whispering promises. Promises of revenge against an unjust world that took her from them, promises of eternity, promises to fight against hell and drag her out of the aetherial sea themselves.

And such power they had given. They had become a Jubokko, a tree growing tall from the blood of fallen warriors. Their roots spread out across the Steppe and they nourished themselves from the constant strife of the tribes.

Somewhere along the way, their mind was poisoned and they had lost sight of what they meant to accomplish, then centuries later, they remembered through moments of tenderness, warmth. They bring the Murasame up to their vision, staring at the golden hilt, traced over with an ornate criss-cross design. The blade existed only in the spirit world, according to legend. So, if they plunged it into themselves... they would depart.

Their other hand reached out to grab the blade too, and they faltered.

"Boss, ye feckin' idiot!" shouted a privateer, their head tilting towards the intrusion: two battered figures at the archway of the tomb, apparent followers from Eorzea. One was the nosey privateer that dogged at their heels whenever they returned to Tenebris, but the other was Doku. They lurched to their feet, and felt a wave of healing energy wash over them, a spell from Inago. It was helpful and soothing, but not exactly going to fix everything that needed to be fixed. Still, it would allow them to carry on a conversation for at least a while longer.

"Doku. Inago," they greeted, inclining their head only slightly. Their hand bore the hilt, and they had it poised to strike themselves.

"Mina, you need medical attention," Doku said, an attempt to reason. She stepped forward to administer it, and they dug the hilt into their hands, a warning. If someone tried to stop them, the conversation would end with them.

They smiled softly, as best as they could. "Mina needs me out. They can be treated after. While I linger within them, things will not make sense as you try to heal them."

"Yer so feckin' dense!" Inago shouted. "Listen, ye might not be Mina exactly, but ye saved 'em! An' we owe ye fer that, aye!? I ain't gonna sit by an' let ye do whatever grand suicide it is yer plannin'!"

"It's my choice," they answered, voice faltering. "This is the way it should be. Mina never should have had to bear me as a burden, and those scientists never should have unearthed me! I was better off never having existed in the first place."

Inago made an angry noise, a growl morphing into an exasperated cry. "That ain't the feckin' case, boss! Sure, aye, it was awful circumstances what brought ye to us, but yer here now!"

"Yes, and I at least am glad to have met you," Doku added, placing a hand to her heart. "Both of us are. I'm unwilling to accept your excuses. Come up here and we can figure out a way through this, together!"

They shook their head. "We don't have time for that. Mina's body... that cowering from before, and every time I have. It tears them apart, bit by bit, and soon there will be nothing left to save."

"Then I'll feckin' stitch ye back together, aye!?"

There was a soft chuckle, and their grip redoubled. "I am in awe of the two of you for still seeing me as a friend even after such a display. The world... the world could do with more people like you."

Those are meant to be their last words. They drive the blade in, finally, and once they do, their body goes limp, a soul departing Mina's as it's struck backwards from the forceful excision. It begins to tear away. They collapsed, and as that happens, Inago springs to action.

He wove a complex spell, illuminating every corner of the room with stars, an astral spiderweb. From his hand, a chain made of the same stuff emitted, and Inago cried out, "think of the people what want ye around, mate! Ye may not be Mina, mate, but I ain't gonna let ye go easy!"

"Not when there are so many awaiting your return, you will *not* go quietly!" Doku shouted, adding her voice to the chorus. "Think of me! Think of Luciel, think of Solana! All those that willingly gave you blood, their desire to help you in spite of the pain!"

"Aye...! An' that's why we ain't lettin' ye fade away!" The chain extended all the way to the spirit, lingering just outside of Mina's body, passage stopped by the Lalafell's force of will.

"You don't have to just be one of our memories. You're one of us!" Doku called.

There was a hesitation. The spirit, lingering at the edge of reality, began to accept the cries for them, and the chain completed. With a swirl of the cosmos expanding and contracting in a single instant, Inago has fully bound them within a small jewel, which lights up like starlight. A whole universe seems to shimmer within, and Inago lets out a long sigh of relief. "Phew! I won't lie to ye lass, that wasn't necessarily plan A, aye?"

Doku sauntered over and plucked the jewel from the ground. "So... their soul is within this, then?"

"Aye, but from my understandin' it's a bit more, erm... sanitary, than 'ow it was before. We can keep it there until we figure out... what exactly it is we can do with it, but at least for now, it should be that they're alive within there. Nothin' with the whole body possession thing again, I would hope. An' Mina shouldn't need t' drink blood and such either."

Doku almost seemed disappointed at that, but her concern over Mina in that moment was remembered, rushing to their side to start working at their wounds after stowing carefully, in a close and safe pocket, the jewel containing the passenger. They were sporting only the sports swimsuit that the passenger had decided on, though on inspection of the satchel that they had brought with them, there was a change of clothes inside. There was a pulse, thank goodness, but they were unconscious and likely would be for a while. Their hair still maintained the snowy white hue, but gone were the streaks of blood red.

She worked quickly and precisely, motions swift and efficient. Bandages were applied over any visible wounds, mostly each limb sporting pricks of blood from where the spectral vines had extruded, and the major burns were treated as well with ointment. It may not have been immediate, but care rendered shortly after things resolved would likely mean they were well before too long.

Inago checked after them. "Looks like the coast is clear, lass. Though, ah... gettin' 'em out might be a minor hassle, we'll have to swim up from the bottom of the ocean with 'em."

"It's just a little bit longer, Inago," Doku chuckled. "We can manage."

Suddenly, it all changed.

Mina thinks it was going to start like all the other dreams. They feel the same sensation of weightlessness that comes with waking up in that tank of serum, but there is no feeling of their brain being pricked with needles, of their physiology changing for a scientist's whims. They open their eyes. Pink hair frames their vision. They are like themselves.

It is an odd, unfamiliar feeling at this point, so used to replaying the same few minutes. Someone is in front of them. Like them, but not them, snowy white locks traced with red. Eyes unfamiliar, glowing red. Someone else's eyes, but so close to them.

"Who... are you?" Mina asks.

"A passenger."

"But what's your name?"

"I don't think I have one any more. For so long I did not use it, and they did not call me by one."

Mina smiles sadly. "I see. Why do you look like me?"

The answer is forthcoming, but reticent. "It was my last form. You were my last host, and for that I apologize."

"Your host? ...It was... when I passed out in the snow. So... you're the reason for my need to drink blood."

"Yes," is the short answer, given within an exhalation.

Mina pauses to think. "When... when were you, your first memory?"

"Doma. At the tombstone, where your parents are buried," they provide. After a pause, they add, "or at least, where they are believed to be buried, the unmarked tombstone."

"I see. ...Why am I speaking to you? I've been locked inside a memory," asks Mina. "The same moment... when you were given to me?"

"I was unaware that was where you were presiding within your own mind. Was it a recursive dream?"

"...more illuminating than often before," Mina answers vaguely. "Is... was that your doing?"

"It was not my intention if it was the case. I think my own grief was interfering with your ordinary patterns." They close their eyes, their gaze cast past Mina. "It should cease with my departure."

"Your... your departure?" Mina asks, eyes widening. "W-wait, I... we just met!"

"And I am glad to have met you," they say, nodding their head with a soft smile. "You are a life-changing person."

"I...!"

Mina's eyes flutter open. They brush hair away from their face, or at least try to, their hand wrapped several times over in white linens. It didn't move very much either. Everything fucking ached. They try to assess their environment, dry eyes blinking to look over their surroundings. The left, then the right: the Redwing's private quarters. And that was Doku. A little bit of a surprise. They were glad to see her.

"Hi Doku," Mina says, in a quiet voice.

The elezen immediately places down the potion vials she had been nervously tinkering with, sensitive hearing picking up the voice. She moves to Mina's side and kneels down, carefully brushing away the stray strands of white hair. Honestly, she had not expected them to be awake so soon, though the relief is clear to see on her face.

"Hello Mina," Doku says, smiling gently. "It's wonderful to see you again, though I wish it were under better circumstances." That said, she certainly does not regret joining Inago to retrieve the Au Ra. The elezen sees the irony in that moment. It seems like the tables have turned for the both of them.

"Yes," Mina agrees, eyes darting down to assess the not inconsiderable damage. Each of their limbs was wrapped, alongside one binding their stomach. "...what all happened? To me? I remember... you in your chambers, and leaving, and the snow... and then my memory stops. There was a me, but not me?" they wince, trying to draw memory out from within them, but nothing is there to retrieve.

Doku bites her lip. She barely remembers the first time she woke up after the explosion. "Fraid I wouldn't know much about those situations," she says. "By the time I came to awareness, you were already...in your head, so to speak. Your... spirit... was in charge."

She did not feel comfortable calling Mina's other self a parasite, in spite of the self-given nomenclature. Doku smiles mirthlessly, wishing she could have done something more for Mina.

'We had own problems,' Edera mumbles in their head. 'Little one would understand. I think.'

The elezen does not bother with a response to her other, choosing instead to run her eyes over Mina's body. She knew the wounds had been tended to as best as they could under the circumstances, but the underlying worry was still there.

"My... spirit," Mina says, laughing ever so slightly. "I... I spoke to them. But... it was not for long. I'm guessing that since you're tending to me and ambulatory, it means that I've been, ah... Inhabited for some time, then."

Humming, Doku tilts her head thoughtfully. "Something like that," she says. "My guess is they took charge shortly after my first waking, so something must have happened to require it."

They grit their teeth, biting something back, and Doku furrows her brow at their pain. "So... were... were you and Inago the ones that brought me back?"

Doku smiles sheepishly. "Yes, that would be correct. Inago seemed determined to go looking for you, and we may have... strongly suggested we wanted to join the search."

'Bullied. We bullied little flirt,' Edera mentally provides. 'Well... you more than me.'

Again, Doku ignores her. "Your spirit deemed it necessary to swim the length of the Ruby Sea and force their way beneath Hell's Lid." She clicks her tongue in annoyance, still thinking it was a foolhardy decision.

They nod. "I see. Uhm... I'll be sure to thank him, then," Mina mumbles, thumping one of their legs. In truth, they didn't see anything all too wrong with that. "Swimming the Ruby Sea is well within my parameters, I think. Hell's Lid... Uhm, I see," they comment, blinking, and mentally noting that they probably shouldn't try to do that in the future, once everything had healed. Doku casts them a sharp and unamused glance, as if to say 'just because you can doesn't mean you should.'

They felt a little lost by trying to figure out everything, but they would fill in the gaps after more pressing issues were managed. "...what has become of them? My alter?"

Doku sighs and places her hand on the leg to still it. With her other hand she reaches into her coat and plucks out a clean, folded handkerchief. The elezen unwraps it to reveal a shiny jewel, holding it up for Mina's viewing. "Well, Inago was able to transfer them to this," she says. After *another* foolhardy decision, but she bites back that comment. "Truthfully, what becomes of them is... for you to decide."

"For... they're within that?" Mina wonders aloud. "Did... that tome I gave Inago. He managed to... that's... incredible," they breathe out eventually. "I... am wholly unsure what is possible to do with such a thing even if I could replicate that magick."

Doku smiles fondly at them. "Heh. He does seem to have a rather strange affinity for such magicks," she says. "Perhaps you could do some research or confer with Inago? Though we suggest recovering first, darlin'. No need to make a decision right away."

"Right," Mina nods, biting at their lower lip. "...we? Are... you're with another?" they ask, trying to crane their neck to peer around the cabin.

"Ah," Doku starts. She had not realized she started referring to herself as two people. Edera snickers in their head. The elezen hesitates, but decides it is better to just come out with it. "Something like that. The explosion seems to have unlocked my, er...draconic side. She calls herself Edera."

At that, the pupil of Doku's blue eye starts to lengthen and taper. "Hello, little one," Edera greets. "Nice to see alive."

"Ah," Mina nods, trying to piece together a timeline in their head, and guesses, "The... the seals. Presumably those were putting Edera away? N-nice to meet you! By the way. I am Mina Ohasakou, of Tenebrus. Presumably, uhm... with that explosion..."

Edera nods. "Deau— Doku not know," she says. Though truthfully, nobody had predicted Edera would be born from the dragon's blood. "Assumed whispers were her mind breaking, and Ishgard encouraged seals." But that is neither here nor there at the moment. The elezen starts fussing over Mina's bandages, making sure they are in place and no bleeding seems to be occurring. "Nice to meet proper, little one. I am Edera. Need something for pain?"

"Everything seems, ah... well managed," they answer. "I admit curiosity as to your cohabitation...? It seems... Seamless."

The cotton candy haired woman clicks her tongue. Edera snickers amusedly, though she tilts her head in a creaturelike movement. "Deau tired during much of recovery and decide to hide in mind," she says. "Much time for think." Perhaps Doku had been entirely too accepting of Edera, but it did help that she had other things on her mind to worry about. "Seem seamless now, but Deau spent much life essence on hiding until few nights ago."

"...do you two need a top-up on aether?" Mina asks, tilting their head. Edera shakes her head, looking at Mina for the pain they suspected they were feeling. A slight wince betrays it, and Mina sucks in a breath through their teeth. "S-something for the pain would be good, yes."

Her eye picks up on the discomfort and she immediately gets up to grab a pain potion. She comes back with a small vial, the contents a pleasant looking grass green. "Open wide for us, little one," Edera purrs out, uncorking the vial.

They do as requested, bashfully, eyes fluttering to the side. "Thank you." Lips press to glass. Slowly and gently, Edera curls her other hand behind Mina's head and provides support as she lifts it. She tilts the vial and begins to feed the contents to them.

The horned elezen bites back a smile, though there is a sparkle of amusement in her eye. "Little one has good manners. That pleases us much," Edera says. If they still had their tail it would be wagging.

When finished, Mina shivers. The taste didn't quite match the hue. "S-so, uhm. I... would like to apologize, at least. I think... I made you worry. My crew as well, for... all that behavior? So... I am sorry."

Edera lowers them back down and corks the vial. She brushes loose strands of hair away from their face, crooning softly. "Much worry, yes. But we just glad you safe." The last part is said with an odd cadence, as if two people were speaking at once— which is the truth. "No sorry needed, though we think much will be asked."

"Yes, I intend to give all honesty in due time," Mina says, nodding slightly.

They shift their tail, and hum, observing it. There was a new scar there, but it seemed like they would have a lot of new ones. A worried noise escapes Edera, wondering where that one came from. "Mm. Not think we have paste for scar in crates, but let know in future if have need," Edera says. "Anything else need tend to?"

"Mm. It seems like it healed already...?" Mina muses. They had cared a lot about the integrity of their host, it seemed. "All things told, in spite of how damaged I seem to be, I am well."

"Much good. Damage go away with time," she says. "Perhaps some faster than others." Edera looks down at her hands and flexes her fingers, humming thoughtfully. She shakes her head and puffs a small burst of steam through her nostrils.

Mina nods, eyes lidding over again. "Thank you. Deeply. I don't... know all the specifics of what I-but-not-I was doing, but... I think that this might be the best of a bad situation."

Smiling gently, Edera pats their head. However, she breathes in and then it is Doku carding her fingers through their soft hair and ruffling it. "You're welcome, darlin'," she says softly. "Perhaps that could be hashed out some other time after you have had time to rest. If it is any comfort, they did not seem to want to prolong any potential suffering."

"That's... a relief, and a surprise," Mina comments. "The... The circumstance around my original possession is... You know of it, yes? When I was in Bozja. Though, suppose... that's not *exactly* a possession," they sigh out. "It's odd, then, if whatever it is that inhabited me didn't... want to be there."

Doku hums, agreeing. "Mm. We only met a couple times, so what they were thinking...we know very little," she says. "However, the strain on your body seemed to cause them concern. And from what I overheard from Inago and Zamir... the amount they needed to consume had risen too far."

"That matches with the amount I was drinking before I lost my memories too, so... I'll follow up with them, I suppose. Fill in the gaps where I can... just. That crystal, hm? I'll have to bother some poor Sharlayan scholar. You know that spell was entirely theory? Inago might be the very first person to actually cast that spell. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say his star globe," they chuckle.

She fiddles with a lock of their hair before releasing it. "That would be a wise idea. I believe Solana has spoken to them a bit as well."

Getting up again, Doku moves over to a crate and pulls out a small, ornate box. Inside are a couple of vials, gold and silver in color. Sparing them a glance, she plucks them out and tucks them into her coat before moving back to Mina's side. She takes the jewel and places it inside, setting it beside the Au Ra. "Seems a much better fit for this box," she comments.

"Back to Sharlayan then? I'm sure they could use a reprieve from their tomes." The elezen pauses to chuckle amusedly. Her own alchemist mentor had been from Sharlayan, so she was familiar with how things operated there. And perhaps she had picked up some habits. However, she raises an eyebrow. "What a curious little fellow, and an even curiouiser star globe. I believe he mentioned it being a relic? Perhaps hound a scholar and then him, eh?"

"Perhaps! But it's nice to know that I'll have plenty to do once I recover. I deal poorly with downtime, as you well know. Ah, thank you. I... yes, it's kismet that we even have them retrieved, hm?" Mina's eyes sparkle. "And then, with everything done, we can see about getting something done. I'm sure we can figure something out to allow them some kind of existence, and perhaps one that isn't even tethered to me. But... for now, I think they've earned some rest."

Doku laughs lightly, seeing them the most animated she has probably ever seen them. 'Recovery shouldn't be too bad then,' she thinks. Edera hums an agreement. The elezen looks down at the box, silently praying to Halone for them to have a more fulfilling and happier existence someday.

