

The world faded back into existence, the Echo releasing its grip on her senses as the vision ended. Once more, Aigead Siorc was face-to-face with a dying man.

“Please... I don’t want to die...”

The man was the father of Asahi sas Brutus, a high-ranking Tribunus of the Garlean military and supposed member of the Populares, a progressive organization within Garlemald looking to broker peace with the now-liberated Doma. More relevant to their current concerns, he and his wife, who lay dead not a few feet away, had also been the adoptive parents of Yotsuyu goe Brutus. The former viceroy had once been thought dead, crushed in the collapse of Doma Castle along with the Roegadyn Samurai Gosetsu, but both of them turned up some time later alive and well, albeit with Yotsuyu bereft of her memories, referring to herself as “Tsuyu.”

For a time, it seemed as though she was content to live as such; a second chance, an opportunity to put who she was behind her and live life anew. It was a situation Aigead herself was familiar with, having worked as hard as she had up to this point to improve her own nature.

And now, coldly watching as the life slipped from the eyes of the man before her, she was reminded how easily that progress can collapse.

“Any sign of her?” a voice cried out. Hien Rijin, newly ascended king of Doma following its liberation. A perfectly fine individual all around, but prior experience prepared Aigead for him to not handle this situation delicately. “...What happened here?” he asked, observing the scene.

“...I arrived too late,” the Viera explained. She stood up, turning her back to the corpses. “She was already dead and he was too far gone to save.” The statement was the truth; there was no way the father was going to make it. Aigead questioned, however, if she would have bothered trying had she had the opportunity. She explained what the Echo had shown her: How Yotsuyu had regained her memories, her fear at remembering who she was, and how her adoptive parents approached her with the intent to take advantage of her former amnesiac state to barter their own passage back to Garlemald by selling her off. Finally, how Asahi had arrived just after she murdered the couple to claim her, having orchestrated the whole bloody reunion.

“I knew what would happen if she recovered, and *still* I did nothing,” Hien responded. “...You say she left with her brother? Whatever he wants with her, he was willing to pay for it with his parents’ lives...”

“Really? *That’s* your takeaway from this?”

The tone in Aigead’s voice seemed to catch Hien off-guard.

“After everything I just told you, after everything you know of her past, the most you can do is muster up more sympathy for her *parents* and wish that you’d instead, what, locked her in a cage like an animal?” she asked, her voice raised.

Hien crossed his arms. "Generally, yes, I do tend to offer my sympathies for the victims of a *murder*," he replied, clearly taking issue with Aigead's tone.

"Oh, *please*," Aigead scoffed. "They weren't victims. They abused her. Physically. Emotionally. They tore her down every day of her life and then shipped her off to curry favor with a broke noble who only continued their work. They should count themselves lucky they got to live the lives they did because this was *long* overdue."

"And what of her other victims?" Hien fired back, standing his ground. "The years of torture and death, so often carried out by her own hand? Surely you don't believe they deserved it as well?" He didn't allow Aigead a moment to respond, knowing the question was a rhetorical one. "It was not by her parents' hand that so many perished. It was not her parents that led her to betray the Liberation Front—"

"No, I suppose it wasn't!" Aigead interjected, cutting Hien off. "I suppose the blame for that would lie with whoever it was that tried to *feed* her to the crown prince, wouldn't it?" She locked eyes with Hien, as though making some unspoken challenge. "Tell me again, Hien: Who was it who made that call?"

Hien met her gaze, calling her bluff. "Choose your next words *very* carefully, my friend."

They stood there, staring each other down. Eventually, Aigead relented, scoffing and pushing past Hien and storming off back towards the Kienkan.

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*Shave and a haircut.*

The rhythmic knocking at the door to the room she'd been given at the Kienkan roused Aigead from her daydreaming. She figured someone would come by eventually; no doubt Hien had relayed the argument she'd had with him to the others and was presently worried she wouldn't be willing to do her part at the prisoner exchange. Staring out her window, she thought about how absurd of a notion that seemed like.

*Shave and a haircut.*

The pattern gave Aigead a pretty good idea of who they were sending to fetch her. If she was right, then...

"Aigead, come on, can we talk?"

*Gods above that's so unfair*, she thought. "Sure sure, 'two gil,' come on in."

The door slid open, revealing the dark hair, cat-like ears, and white robes of Maya Capra, one of Aigead's closest friends. The Wandering White Mage had accompanied Aigead to Yanxia to assist in the Doman liberation and recovery efforts. And now, it seemed, she was assisting the others in repairing relations with the Warrior of Light. "Hey there, funny buns."

Aigead couldn't help but chuckle at the greeting. "Goodness, opening with pet names, huh? They must be really worried out there." She turned back to her view outside the window. "I take it everyone's heard the details then?"

Maya made her way over and sat down next to Aigead's spot on the floor. "There's been some discussion," she explained. "I think one or two people believe you may have fallen in love with the former viceroy." ("That would be incredibly inappropriate.") "Alphinaud actually wanted to come in here to talk it over with you, but..." She placed a hand on Aigead's back. "I have a feeling this probably runs a bit deeper for you, doesn't it?"

The Viera didn't say anything for some time. "...she was scared, Maya. She remembered everything and it scared her. She didn't want that to be her anymore. And then... that *little rat bastard*..." she said, gritting her teeth at the thought of Asahi.

She pulled her knees into her chest. "If someone can want that badly to be different, only for people to act like they should have never given them a chance to begin with when something goes wrong... what does that mean for me?"

It wasn't a question she expected Maya to have an answer for. She didn't think anyone would have a good answer for it. Putting it into words helped her get the thoughts swirling around in her head organized in a way she could tackle them, in her own time, and Maya Capra was the only person present she felt comfortable letting into that process.

The Miqo'te embraced her. Aigead was grateful for the gesture.