

## --The Grand Companies--

Out into the night they moved; several groups of adventurers backed by the might of three Grand Company units.

"We know we've two incoming groups-" the Immortal Flames commander quickly briefed Sera over the linkpearl. "If your men counter the west, the Maelstrom will back both up with long range."

"Understood." Meanwhile, the Adder reached out to Syvarre. "Flames are going west, and we'll take the Serpents west. We need to make sure they don't break our line."

Zana quickly saluted, her face stone but her tail revealing her very real fear as the roars of battle began. She turned to Sylvarre, "I'm ready Captain!" her voice not quite able to hide the nerves she held.

"I wasn't expecting a dance so soon..." He nodded his head towards Zana as he grabbed his spear and readied to set off into the fray. "Stay close, this is not a drill!"

Sera, meanwhile, had left the command tent, already mounting a chocobo and heading straight for the front. With the reins in one hand, she used her thumb to push her new linkpearl into her ear; one such device in each ear to communicate with her own team and to contact her assigned command.

"Ember, this is Baroness," her tone was brisk and clipped, her tone jilted slightly by the movements of her mount as she stood up in the stirrups, bowed forward in a crouched posture for maximum speed. "We've been assigned to the front. Head for the west side and you'll find our ranks there. Collect a linkpearl from the command post on the way and join me on the other frequency."

As she rode, Sera turned her chocobo away from the trenches onto an upward incline; the burned out remnants of an Imperial troops carrier that had crashed into the ground during the previous engagements. The bird's powerful, clawed feet latched onto the metal as surely as a grappling hook, speeding Seraphina upwards towards what once had been the rear of the vessel; its nose buried several yalms into the jagged black rock. Finally reaching the peak, the chocobo perched on the twisted, half-melted edge of what had once been the vessel's rear thrusters while Sera took stock of what lay ahead.

Beneath her, the length of the Alliance line yawned forth, giving her the first look at what forces were at their disposal. The Immortal Flames had maintained a sizable force along the Ala Mhigan front for months, and she was not surprised to see that the troops representing the Grand Company were substantial. Row upon row of dark green, iron helmets and dark great coats showed her that whoever was in command had already organised her troops into ranks.

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An eye-count suggested that she had the lion's share of a brigade on hand; a solid block of eighty infantry formed the core of the Flame's defensive line, organised into a rectangular formation, with some twenty of their number easily visible at the front wearing the thick, heavy plate armour of the Bloodsworn. Behind them, two smaller blocks; two lines of archers, twenty men across, and a cone-formation of armoured chocobo riders, each standing ready with their long, heavy spears raised; thirty cavalry in all.

"Alright, half a brigade, then," she grunted to herself. "Here's hoping it's enough..."

Unplugging her unit's linkpearl to avoid compromising her hearing, she pressed a finger to the linkpearl that had been provided by the Commander. The brief buzz of static rattled through the earpiece before she spoke.

"Lieutenant R'shi, this is Cershald. I'm closing on your position. I need you to lengthen the line, no more than three ranks deep. We can't let the Imps outflank us. Get those archers into position behind, use the trenches. They can volley fire up and over our infantry line..."

Her eyes shifted over the Flames line one more time, considering the situation.

"Ember, if you're on this channel by now, take command of the cavalry and move them out of sight. Await instructions. Send the others to me."

Her orders given, she kicked her heels into her chocobos flanks to spur the armoured mount onward; the chocobo warbled loudly before leaping from the lofty perch down to ground level and renewing its sprint towards the front lines; straight towards the head of the infantry formation.

Behind them the Adders too charged forward for their battleground, first those with lances as the bowmen lined up at the back.

The fray had begun in earnest.

--Zeke and Charbonnier--

Zeke and Charbonnier's goal was clear - the Alliance had learned of an attempt to cut off their supply lines, and they would need protecting. Although further away from the actual melee, they were unsure of the size of the attacking group. "If it's more than you can handle, let us know." one said, as he pressed the linkpearl into their hands. Nothing they could do now other than head out.

"I-I'll follow your lead Ed, you have experience in war and I trust you, let's s-save these supply lines eh?" Zeke kept his stance, fists poised and prepared to strike or intercept any approaching enemies as he waited for the others' signal to move on after their target.

Having received his orders, Charbonnier turned on his heel, leaving the others to deal with the attack incoming from the north. He gave Azekiel a curt nod in acknowledgement and set off in a brisk jog towards the road they were supposed to defend. He scoured their surroundings, grimly noting the lack of defensive positions before his eyes flickered skyward. During the initial briefing before the others' arrival, he had received troubling news of a possible bombardment, followed by advancing troops on foot.

Glancing behind them, he deemed the two were far enough from the main action and from a potential presence of one of those crystals to use aether. Without a word, he cast nocturnal shields on both of them. Should either of them be unlucky enough to be too close to a dropped bomb, the shield would not be enough to save them, but at the very least it would ensure neither would die in a shower of shrapnel.

The Duskwight then moved to the other side of the road where he presumed the possible attack to come from. Setting his halberd aside for a moment, he dug a small hole and placed his hand on the starglobe. It hummed and shone as a spell was cast. A small flickering speck of light appeared in the hole, which the elezen promptly covered with the excess dirt. He repeated the same action around the road, planting magical mines that he could trigger at will.

He gave Azekiel another reassuring smile with his eyes and moved back to their side of the road and began to dig a foxhole, large enough to fit the two of them.

So far, so good. The soil, churned up as it was, was soft and yielded quickly. No sign of the attack.

Charbonnier handed a spare shovel to Azekiel. His voice was calm and pleasant, almost conversational when he broke the silence. "Something I learnt in Bozja." He jabbed his thumb towards the unfinished foxhole. "The Imps have always enjoyed aerial superiority and we have cause to believe they will utilise it to destroy the road and disrupt the supply lines." He paused for a moment to listen for the tell-tale rumble of distant engines, but hearing none, the Duskwight continued to upturn the soil. "I had a similar situation back there when me, Rina'ta and the Rags escorted relief supplies to a recently liberated village through enemy territory. We were ambushed in a pincer attack, followed by a Gabriel. Back then, we had better cover. We were passing through a swampland and had the canopy of trees to keep us relatively hidden."

The Duskwight continued to fill the silence that was disturbed by distant sounds of gunfire and shouting, hoping it would help keep Azekiel calm and clear-headed for the upcoming battle. "If the air support strikes first—which would make most sense as they wouldn't want to accidentally cause friendly fire—there's a chance I can take at least one of the aerial machines down before they pass and possibly engage our allies from the rear. Their flight pattern and speed is easier to predict than a dragon's that rely on wind and thermals to decrease the flapping and tiring of their wings. But once the ground troops arrive, I'll have to disengage. I rather not get shot down. There's no cover midair and little possibility for evasive maneuvers. On top of that, the shields

can withstand only so many rounds." Charbonnier's lips stretched to a thin and grim line as he recalled the time he had attempted to cover Elrias from being shot full of lead. Since then he had invested in better quality armour that had been tested by the machinists, but he knew that the Garleans were always one step ahead when it came to firearms. Not to mention heavy artillery.

Zeke began jogging after Ed immediately, keeping a step or two behind so that he could reliably follow the others lead. Now out of the 'formal' meeting and thrown into conflict he began to steel his resolve and himself which was made only easier by working alongside his trusted comrade and dear friend.

As the nocturnal shield shimmered over his form he took a moment to examine himself over, clearly taking the use of aether as an indication that he could let loose a little in the upcoming battle without the need to take calculated restraints in terms of his own aether usage, nodding once toward the Elezen in appreciation with an ephemeral smile. Curiously he watched as Charbo began to dig out holes, unsure as to the motive and thus the pugilist simply stood by keeping his gaze circulating between both ends of the supply road for any activity or incoming Garleans - That was until he was handed a shovel, at which point he began aiding in digging out similar holes for Ed to begin planting further bombs. He was relatively clueless, but he made sure there was a good distance between each hole. "I'm not much of an...a-aerial unit, but I can try support you as much as I can, I'm starting to get a few nifty tricks under my belt that aren't just offensive." He beamed confidently, pausing his digging every so often to scope the supply line one more.

"So I'm assuming we take out any aerial support that may come o-ver, and we keep ourselves on this side of the ground field to force their units over the mines? Treat me a-as one of your subordinates by the way, Light knows without instruction I tend to do some pretty stupid stuff. Bozja must have been...terrifying, glad y-you got back alright."

"Aye, that's right. We hide in the foxhole for the duration of the bombing as not to give the Imps a bullseye to target. And don't worry, I'll keep you in line." Charbonnier clapped Azekiel's shoulder before continuing to shovel. "As for Bozja... Well, it was certainly an experience. Ever heard of a crocodile? They're like wingless, slithering dragons with huge maws that live in swamps. Saw with my own eyes one of those scaly bastards sneak up from the waters. An Imp tripped over its tail and ended up having his leg ripped off straight from the socket. Think the Bozjans call it a 'death roll'."

Charbonnier crinkled his nose in distaste as he recalled the horrified cry of surprise and pain and the sickly crunch of meat and bone being torn.

"Anyhow... The local flora and fauna, the trenches, the ravaged lands and the endless clanking of machines, the bombings... It's a very different kind of warfare from what I'm used to, but at the same time when you get to the basics, it isn't. Instead of swooping dragons breathing fire, you have the Gabriels that dive and pelt the ground troops full of lead with machine guns. Instead of

hulking diresaurs, you have magitek hexadrones. It is also a type of mental warfare... The constant noise keeps one's body in high alert which tires a person and makes them more prone to making mistakes that can cost their lives. There are muddy bomb-shelled and unoccupied lands between the opposing factions that the Bozjans call 'no man's land', because they aren't safe for crossing. Each stay in their trenches. It can take even weeks for there to be any meaningful advancement on either side."

Once the foxhole was to his satisfaction, he placed the shovel at the bottom and out of sight. From a nearby bush he collected leafy branches to camouflage their hiding place.

"What tricks have you learnt, Zeke? I would like to know all of your available assets to ensure I can exhaust every possibility...."

Somewhere in the distance, the faint sound of a ceruleum engine could be heard.

--Akiko and Kirigi--

Once tuned into the linkpearl, Akiko and Kirigi's target was quickly assigned - one of the three known magitek weapons. They had the coordinates of its last position. somewhere across the battlefield. To get there, they'd have to cut through the Garleans in their way...

"Aki."

"On it."

That was apparently enough communication between the two for Akiko to levitate horizontally above the ground, and Kirigi to get onto her back in a kneeling position, holding into her wife's shoulder beneath with one hand while the other held her weapon. In this peculiar pose, Akiko accelerated forward with Kirigi on her back like she was kneeling on a surfboard, both their eyes open for the first Garlean contact they'd encounter; the quicker and more efficiently they got this done, the better. No reason to waste time moving on foot.

It wasn't long until they caught the front of the line, charging straight for them. Shots started to ring out as a number caught sight of them and opened fire.

Akiko didn't stop racing towards them though; she held her gunblade forward and loosened a shot, creating a frontal shield to deflect the oncoming shots.

"Small fry in our way, huh?", Kirigi called out through the soaring wind blasting past them on this Xaela surfboard ride. "Vanguard for their Magitek toys...?"

"Looks like it. What do?"

"Swing me!"

Akiko didn't respond to that; she just smirked to herself, knowing what Kirigi meant by that, and passed her gunblade over to her left hand. The silver-haired Xaela dropped off sideways from Akiko's back and held her hand out... which the latter took a firm hold of, beginning to spin as she still raced forward - thus swinging Kirigi and her greatsword round and round as they reached the Garleans, mowing them down with what was, in all honesty, a sharpened, oversized hunk of massive steel.

When their pass (literally) through that particular group of Garlean soldiers was finished, Akiko lifted her flight trajectory upwards for a moment and let go of Kirigi, throwing her skyward. Using that moment to turn around, she conjured a few of her spellcasting seals to pelt whoever was left standing after that with Quickjolt projectile spells... and then grabbed Kirigi's hand as she fell back down, swinging her around to carry her on her back again.

"I said 'swing me', not 'throw me'...!", Kirigi scolded her wife somewhere between raised eyebrow and chuckle.

"Didn't say 'catch me' either... was that wrong too?"

Kirigi didn't dignify that with a response beyond sounding a "tsk" with a sneer on her lips; instead, she and Akiko alike focused on acquiring the next threat in their way.

A good few of their number fell and they drew back, only to quickly reorganize at a distant shout. More gunfire followed, focused on them both.

Akiko began dodging maneuvers in mid-air while giving Kirigi on her back an elbow nudge. "Hey. Do your thing?"

"Sure, drop me."

At the end of the day... Kirigi's specialties were drawing attention and soaking damage, after all. So Kirigi got ready, casting a Blackest Night shield on herself, and Akiko performed a downward backflip - launching Kirigi straight into the midst of the Garlean soldiers, letting loose an Unleash spell upon impact in order to take down a few and demand the attention of the rest.

As Kirigi was doing that, Akiko meanwhile did what she was best at herself: Attacking, and being fast while doing so. Gunblade in hand, she zipped about and across the pack of soldiers around Kirigi like a bird of prey, picking one or two off with each swoop.

They broke through the line with ease. In the distance now - perhaps a malm away - what presumably was their target came into view. Some sort of oversized cannon it appeared at first glance - hard to say.

Kirigi blasting away some left before her with a Quietus technique using the energies of her broken Blackest Night shield while Akiko descended upon the last one to cleave him through, the two women directed their attention towards the threat looming in the distance.

"That might be our target...", Kirigi mumbled. "Looks pretty... big."

Akiko flicked her blade to the side to clean it of all the blood. "The more spots to hit it. Hop on."

And thus, Kirigi got on Akiko's back again, and the two raced toward their target in the distance... eyes always open for more soldiers intent on standing in their way.

The two made their way closer and closer to the warmachine in the background, it's shape now becoming clear. No Weapon, but clearly some sort of inspired...thing. Jutting out from its back, however, was clearly the biggest concern - a full array of long, slender crystals.

Akiko turned upright and came to a skidding stop across the dirt, at a still somewhat safe distance from the enemy to let Kirigi off her back, and for the two of them to get ready.

Immediately, though... Akiko's attention was drawn to the array of huge crystals. "... oh fuck..."

"Aki?" Kirigi already lowered her stance, greatsword gripped tightly with both hands; her wife's reaction made her impression darken. "You're not going to tell me those are the same as the crystals you researched... the ones in that base I raided with the others?"

Akiko too shifted her stance, ready to attack. She nodded slowly. "... they are."

"But - you never told me they'd be this huge..."

"Because I never saw any this huge. In fact..." Akiko raised her left hand and pushed up her eye mask, adjusting it a bit. "... those are much bigger than what I already labeled as too big to safely keep in storage during my research."

"Then... that just means we have to take those out first", Kirigi responded confidently, one last time readjusting her stance and grip on her weapon.

"... mm." Akiko's hand on her weapon tightened for a split second, and the Allagan lines on it came to life in a vibrant blue. "So. The usual?"

Kirigi merely nodded... which prompted Akiko to whip her gunblade around to point the tip downward, and ram it into the ground with the blunt facing forward. Kirigi then did a small hop backwards, landing with the ball of her left foot against the weapon, the other foot firmly on the ground - and together with an assisting blast of wind aether by Akiko, she pushed herself off the blade almost like a runner off the starting position, catapulting her towards their foe in a long, low arc through the air; Akiko herself darted off as well, following closely behind Kirigi.

While they were indeed dashing straight at the warmachina, both of them didn't have all-out offense in mind - not yet; before they would begin launching attacks of their own, they intended to observe their foe's capabilities, strength and fighting style. So yes, while they were charging in from the front, both were mentally prepared to defend or dodge at a moment's notice more than anything.

As they ran forwards, a number of troops turned to attack, gunfire ricocheting all around.

Game on.

--Mis'to, Morgana and Rowland--

Morgana, Mis'to and Rowland quickly received the coordinates of one of the magitek weapons. Again at the back of the field, they'd need to work their way through the attacking Garleans...

Lacey burst in from the aether, her glow low to remain somewhat hidden. Morgana moved quickly to where she was ordered, keeping close to those she was with.

Rowland removed the lantern shield from his back, two more swords sheathed within its design. He kept close to Morgana, ready to give cover or take up the front line melee position "You know I think this is finally the end, it was nice knowing you." he scoffed sarcastically.

"Serious as ever eh Row-" Mis'to kept pace, taking out his hat.

Morgana was too focused on moving to be able to react properly to such a comment, but she made a mental note to teasingly give him what for later.

Rowland raised his sword, the flat of the blade to his head as a red mist started to radiate from his body. Charging forward ready to engage as the melee fighter of the group, at the ready to direct the enemies ire at himself.

The front of the line soon came into sight, a number of gunshots already ringing out.

Morgana took her time to cover each member of her group in an altered shield; one ready to wreak havoc the moment it was broken. Lacey bounded forwards, tails blazing, intent on striking down anyone in her path. Rowland raised his shield and leaned forward, covering his body with its metal. With a surge of aether, the instant he was shielded he was suddenly leap forward across the battlefield to slam his shield into an enemy. Hit or miss he leapt upwards, sword coated in white aether as he swung it three times, white magic flinging out in a circle around him with each swing. Mis'to's katana was already out, the Miqu'te easily keeping pace with both as he either peppered the attackers with bursts of magic or wove through them with his blade.

Between all three they carved their way through, the Garleans barely able to react or resist. Most elected to give them a wide, wide berth, opening up a path to what looked like some sort of twisted machina in front.

"Wait," Mis'to said, quickly, "is that another?"



Morgana furrowed her brow as she kept running. On realising what Mis'to meant she scanned the area for crystals, so she could be sure to keep away from them. She was, by standards, powerless against them, after all.

Rowland sank into his knees, sword at the ready and shield raised in front "Another what? Something I should know before I tackle this big guy?" He quickly glanced about, realising how the Garleans had practically let them come this far. "Besides the fact this is a clear trap." He removed a device at his hip and a lightning crystal from a pouch, inserting it into the magnetic device and attaching it to his blade guard, causing it to spark with aether.

Mis'to looked from one to the other, scanning the horizon. "Shit," he said quietly, "we got two. Look. There's the big guy there, but also that one-" He pointed over to the west, where some distant looming mechanism could be seen. "I'm seeing two, are you?"

"Ohh now I get ya. Want to stick together and focus on the one in front first, or shall I leap on over?"

"Best not to split." Morgana's eyes flicked from the two machines, then over to Rowland. "And be careful with your aether, both of you. If there is any of that crystal around, we cannot afford to make the situation worse."

"I'm with whatever we go for." Mis'to squinted between the two, then hurriedly leaped back as a hail of gunfire came his way. "Ah shite-"

Morgana instinctively threw her domed shield over the group; enough to stop most if not all the bullets between that and the altered individual shield. Lacey screeched, eyes darting around for a target.

Rowland smirked, pointing up at the shield. "Ehh what happened to being careful." Now within the shield, however, he took this moment to buff up. Flourishing his blade with a twirl and thrusting it skyward a shield of blackest night surrounded him, while a thin veil of aether, patterned with pentagons, coated his skin designed to blunt blows. He jabbed his blade into the ground as it started to pulse with aether, drawing upon his dragonsblood as he prepared to blast himself off in the direction of the gunfire. "Right, I'm just popping out, be back in a few." He raised his brow, waiting a few seconds for protest. Not *many* seconds however. "M'kay three two one weee~" as Geirskogul erupted from his blade as he went flying off into enemy lines, drawing upon the electricity from the crystal embedded in his blade to unleash a barrage of slashes as he came crashing down into hostile vicinity.

A satchel at the Hyur's side suddenly wriggled and writhed. Spinning around with a wide aetherically bursting swing of his sword, he'd stir up a cloud of dust. Jamming his blade into the ground, he'd reach into the bag, pulling out Red. "Bad breath, boy!" And sure enough as the dust settled and he held the dog out with both hands, poisonous and pungent gas sweeping over the Garleans.

Red, the only canine Blue Mage anyone knew of.

"That guy," Mis'to said gruffly. "The worst it gets the dafter he acts..."

"But, cannot deny he gets results." Morgana took a moment to refresh the shields as Lacey bound after Rowland, not wanting to be left out. Tails ablaze, she spun quickly in the air, striking the foes she could reach while they were incapacitated.

"He's a bad influence on Lacey."

Rolling her eyes, Morgana gave Mis'to a sideways glance; after a moment, the shield around Lacey sprang over to both Rowland and Red.

"Shoulda just bought popcorn- " With that Mis'to drew his katana again, lifting a hand to snap the focus into his hand as he rejoined the fight.

--Akiko and Kirigi--

In the distance, the warmachina itself started to kneel down, those massive crystals pointing forward. A sudden sickening ripple of aether in the air before bursting outwards, a thin but brilliant beam scorching a mark in the ground which promptly exploded, tearing up the ground and sending shrapnel and dust flying.

Akiko, what with her well-trained ability to sense and perceive aether, noticed the attack of the warmachina very quickly; near the end of the wind-up charge of that attack, Akiko darted off and away from the ground to avoid the blast entirely, also making easy fun of the soldiers' gunshots in the process.

Kirigi, on the other hand, didn't have that easy of a time with the sudden attack; she brought up her greatsword and also conjured a Blackest Night shield as she dashed further ahead to fend off the gunshots... but that ripple of aether threw her off-guard more than it warned her. A sidestep allowed her to avoid the narrow beam itself, but she noticed too late what it was going to cause - so despite a leaping roll away to the side, the eruption caught her; the Blackest Night shield broke, and her foot and tail got partly caught in the blast.

"Kiri? You okay!?", Akiko called out immediately, about to rush back down to her- Kirigi called back though, stoically ending her leaping roll smoothly despite the hit she took. "Quit being such a wimp...!", she called back, already back to dashing forward as the energies of the broken shield swirled around her. "Do your job!"

"... mm, right..." Mumbling that to herself with a resigned, lopsided smirk, Akiko turned around in the air and returned to her high approach towards the warmachina itself.

And so, both women tended to their 'assigned jobs', as usual. In detail, that meant...

... Kirigi, for her part, veered off-course from her feinted dash at the warmachina and suddenly blink-teleported right over to the nearest group of soldiers to cleave them through with a wide, brutal Edge of Shadow, using the lingering energies of the Blackest Night shield; if they were going to focus on the warmachina, they wouldn't want to have small fry around to pester them. Hence, that's the job Kirigi took upon herself as she aggressively tore through them as quickly as possible; if that made the warmachina and soldiers themselves focus on her, all the better... defense was her specialty, after all.

Akiko, meanwhile, had her own job to do. After all, her mobility and perception alike were far superior to Kirigi's, and to almost anyone out there in general... who better to fly up higher and get a good, thorough look at the warmachina, its movements, its attacks, and its weakpoints? So that's what Akiko focused on, attentively using and focusing all her senses as she circled above and around the mechanical menace... observation and preparation.

With Kirigi giving her the breathing space, Akiko had enough moments to take a good look at the warmachina.

The crystals in its body were set deep, clearly riddled all the way through. Something of that, though, had clearly affected the thing they were embedded in. From the way it moved it was clear that its joints were badly affected, making its movements slow and ponderous. The thought process of creation had clearly not gone beyond 'stick crystal in thing, cause havoc'. Concerning implications alone.

With the one of the two clearly faltering - but also, in the middle of a group and tearing up their own - the soldiers turned their guns on her, hoping to take advantage of the stumble.

Kirigi was far from unhappy about drawing more gunfire, though; after all, this was what she wanted. There were still soldiers immediately around her though, and the silver-haired Xaela was just fine with that - she could use a quick refresh after the hit she took, after all. Whipping her heavy greatsword around to throw its weight upwards, she went into a backflip, and aimed her hand down at the soldiers to tear them up with an Abyssal Drain spell... consequently healing her own wounds a bit in doing so while she was at it.

With them dealt with, Kirigi's attention turned to the group firing at her from afar. Though her eyes did quickly flit over to the machina; its movements seemed so slow... which was just fine by her - it gave her a moment of downtime to move over to that wannabe firing squad.

Twisting her body around as she fell, Kirigi landed facing towards the soldiers shooting at her, and immediately broke into a sprint. The blunt of her greatsword held vertically in front of her to deflect shots, she shortened the run distance with two more blinks - spacing the last one to have herself barreling right into the group with a Plunge attack, followed right up with a wide, brutal Quietus.

No reason to not show these guys the same dedication and effort she showed the others. Plus, her job of keeping the enemy's attention wasn't done, of course... for above flew Akiko, readying her weapon to land a strike on the warmachina.

Now, of course, she couldn't go for any of her large, devastating spells - even conjuring a Geminus duplicate could prove dangerous near those crystals. So... a physical sword strike it would have to be. Luckily, then, Akiko was pretty good at those to say the least, and Ria's weapon craftsmanship proved sturdy enough to handle that kind of impact on more than one occasion.

So Akiko adjusted her grip on her weapon, holding it tightly with both hands... changing the position of her arms as the blade moved to her lower right side, readying for the swing. And then, Akiko darted off - away from the warmachina, higher up. She described a an upward curve up in the air, creating more distance between herself and the target...

... and then, a loud boom.

Creating a big blast of wind aether surging out of her back as she turned to face the warmachina at the highest point of her flight arc, Akiko rocketed herself right back at the lumbering giant. And another blast. And another, and a fourth - each blast of wind aether creating another loud boom, each blast accelerating her even faster towards the foe. Or more specifically: Towards the back of its legs.

And as Akiko curved her trajectory just above the ground to get the right angle, that's what she swung at - whipping her gunblade forward with all her might, Akiko aimed to cut into the kneepits of the hulking machine with the tip of the blade angled upwards as she passed by at ludicrous speed, to try and do as much damage as possible to its ability to stand and move... ... and more importantly, to cause internal damage and deformation, in an attempt to damage and crack the embedded crystals.

With a loud screeching shriek one of the knee plates of the machina cracked and split, exposing a joint riddled through with crystal. That, in turn, suddenly shattered, sending the entire thing tipping over and leaving its back at the mercy of Akiko. Another crystal broke - and a sudden shuddering through the aether as the entire thing began to pulse with that all-too-familiar out of control surge....

Which was the signal that it was time to switch roles. Both women had known from the start this would probably happen, and they were prepared for that possibility. So when both felt that pulse from the toppled giant, they knew what to do.

Akiko, previously occupied with damaging the thing, now instead positioned herself up in the air above the fallen machina. Letting go of her weapon to have it float next to her as she turned down towards the the crystal-riddled machine, she aimed both hands down.

In the next instant, then, and putting all of her focus and power into it with a strained, concentrated expression on the visible half of her face, she began manipulating the aether in the area. Swirling round and round, as if orbiting a center point... increasing in velocity, flinging

outwards and away from the spherical designated area of Akiko's doing. In other words... she conjured an aetheric vacuum. But not like any before - this one was large enough to envelop the warmachina in its entirety, cutting the crystal off from aether to latch onto.

The hefty downside, of course, was that this made Akiko unable to do anything else. Needless to say, a field of this size couldn't be set and forgotten about; she had to keep focusing on keeping it intact continuously, lest it fall apart and be for naught.

This was where Kirigi had to take over, as planned out beforehand - and said plan had a little trick to it that could only work because Kirigi was Kirigi. Yet before anything could be done... they had to wait a moment. They had to wait until the crystals, bereft of aether sources to gorge on, would go dormant... that was step one of the plan the two had figured out.

And thus, that's what Kirigi did, using the time to instead check their surroundings; dealing with the last of the soldiers in her immediate vicinity by means of ruthlessly cleaving the man in two with a swing of her greatsword, she let her eyes wander around in search of any more nearby hostiles.

Against the barrier the crystal surged, draining every last drop of aether. It shuddered once, the ground turning a deathly shade of white. And then, with one last final splutter, the crystal went quiet.

--Mis'to, Morgana and Rowland--

Forward the three warriors moved, the nature of the machina becoming evident as they grew closer. Like the one that Akiko and Kirigi themselves had just downed, these two resembled crude Weapons set through with an array of crystals. One looked...distinctly jagged, malformed.

"Oh shit-" Mis'to slowed hurriedly once the crystals came into view. "You have got to be kidding me-"

Morgana skidded to a halt a safe distance away, and Lacey returned to her mistress' side. Morgana's eyes now flicked between Rowland and Mis'to.

"Do you think he actually figured out how to use those things, or is this a suicide run?"

"I don't like either option..." Morgana's tone was uneasy.

Seeing his friends stop Rowland came screeching to a halt as he nonchalantly wagged a finger up at the Weapon, eyeing up the crystals.

"Hey, asshat, nice jewelry. Did your sugar daddy buy it for you?"

"What we doing," Mis'to said, uncertainly. "Following your lead."

"It looks like I might need to improvise... with a blade..." Morgana scanned to see if she could see any Imperials around, as well in to take in the state of the crystal. She knew she couldn't cast spells; she was stuck.

"Well we'd better-"

With a sudden ominous hum the crystals along the machine's back suddenly lit up. A sudden thoom and a brilliant bolt burst forth, straight across the battlefield behind them. Sickening waves of aether followed, slow to subside.

Morgana staggered as the sickness hit her and Lacey ran back to her Mistress' side to await further instruction. It was clear that the poor creature was rather uncomfortable, being comprised of aether as she was.

Rowland turned around, watching the explosive wave of aether with a pout, eyes rapidly blinking with an expression that said *Well shit*. Right now, as he looked back to his party realising the predicament the group, including him, were in, he had two options.

Fight or flight.

...What about both?

He thrust his blade into the ground, drawing one of his lighter weight ones from his lantern shield and hurling it down the battlefield to Morgana and Mis'to.

"Can't use too much aether but let's see how your defense holds against this lil' tickle of semi magical artillery."

He removed the gun from his belt, and leapt high up, arm glowing azure blue as he charged the ranged weapon with draconic aether, blasting at the weapon with five Mirage dive-shaped aetherical bullets. They punctured through, a few panels of steel flying. The Weapon itself reeled, readjusted. Nearby, the second also began to turn.

Yep. He'd been noticed. And there was him worried it wouldn't work.

At this closer distance, it was possible to see that these "Weapons", for lack of a better word, were clearly old, even rusted. Re-appropriated Garlean tech, perhaps that of their Iron Giants, with the crystals jammed into them. This wasn't sophisticated at all.

He groaned, scratching the back of his head as he finally realised what they were facing.

"Psh, these amateurs. They got no idea who they're dealing with do they?"

Blade vanishing in a flash of light, only to be replaced with a greatsword, the Shadowbringer. Only spending aether to utilise another jump, he'd leap skyward as he readied his heavy blade to come striking down onto one of the crystals within the construct. How easily could such a crude design be dismembered?

With a loud clang Rowland slammed his sword into the crystal. For a moment, it seemed nothing had happened.

But then, with a sudden loud crack, the single crystal suddenly split along its entire length. A wild pulse of aether, and with an earsplitting screech the crystal blew apart.

As soon as Rowland saw the crack, he leaped skyward once more, pumping a fist as a little quick celebration.

"All right, you're not so tough!"

He'd blast himself back to the ground for a speedy descent, raising his sword to rest it over his shoulder, other hand ruffling through his hair as he looked around for where Morgana and Mis'to went.

"We can unload a few Egis or Carbuncles on these pebbles can't we?" Rowland mused to himself.

Morgana took her time calculating, trying to spot a weak point on the weapons she might be able to safely focus her spells. The last thing she wanted was her magic, or worse, Mis'to's to be used against them. Rowland's attack however had brought a reprieve, giving her a moment to reassess.

Shard rained down from the exploded crystal, disappearing into aether as they struck the ground. The air turned thick and cloying; Mis'to staggered slightly. "Good thing they still do the same-" He drew his rapier. "Not sure we can go close but...I think I have-"

With a sudden flash of light the second warmachine turned on them, the ray tracing across the floor as the ground behind it exploded in a wild surge of magic. Hurriedly Mis'to grabbed Morgana and backflipped, bringing them both out of its range just in time. Lacey poofed out of existence as Morgana squeaked and did not resist. She held tight and pressed as close as she could to keep them aerodynamic. "Row!" Mis'to cried out. "Think you can take care of this guy too?!"

Rowland tapped his greatsword against his pauldron, as in another display of dragoon acrobatics, he flipped backwards in reaction to the explosive ray of light. "Consider it done!" Without any hesitation, he broke into a full sprint towards the warmachina, then bounced into longer strides as he gauged his jump before leaping straight into the air. Spinning so he was

side-on to the hulking machine, blade sparking with Red energy as he unleashed Nastrond, launching himself at the Machina ready to deliver a heavy swing to the crystal.

As Rowland approached the other monstrosity it began to slowly veer towards him, gunfire following with its gaze. He swung his blade to parry the gunfire, wielding the massive hunk of steel with unrealistic dexterity. "Nope, nope, nope, nope -", before finally descending on the crystal with another grand slam. "SUCK ON THIS!"

With a boom it shattered - and shattered badly. A number of razor shards went streaming out, sharp and hard enough to pierce even armour.

"Ah shit..." The magic of a blackest night shield formed. But not around him, as the puppy in his bag was protected. The crystal shrapnel shredded into Rowlands armour and skin, blood spraying down from the sky into the war torn battlefield. Ruining his graceful landing, the hyur plummeted and slammed back first into the dirt. Though at least his dog was safe. He'd examine his wounds and sigh, pinching his brow.

"Morgana's gonna kill me."

"All right-" Mis'to turned to Morgana. "I think I got an idea- thanks to Akiko-" He sprinted out for the other machine.

Morgana furrowed her brow. There was little more that she could do against this crystal than shield her allies if she should not find points to make her spells hit that would not just be turned against them.

"How good is Lacey at aiming eh?" He paused to quickly levitate a chunk of rock into his hands as they ran.

It wasn't Lacey that Mis'to's request summoned; it was Rina. As she flipped into existence she aimed a blade of air straight at the floating rock.

Rina's aim was true; just as Mis'to tossed the rock the blade of air struck it clean. Off it rocketed near as fast as a bullet, and in the distance a single crystal upon the other monstrosity shattered. With a strange mechanical groan the scorpion-like machine whirled around, a beam of aether heading straight for the both of them. Morgana saw it quickly and was able to dodge it with a graceful ease, her movements almost dance-like. Rina, on the other hand, was nearly not so fortunate. Barely had her paws touched the ground before she had to leap to her mistress' side for safety. She gave a screech on landing, blue tails fluffing up, ready to strike another stone in the direction of the machines.

From the corner of her eye, the silver-robed mage saw her friend Rowland land awkwardly, so sent a healing spell in his direction, aiming to repair the surface damage to the young man's skin and give him the strength he needed to keep on fighting.



Morgana could see his hand raise up from the dirt to give a thumbsup. "Thank you!", before he suddenly leaps back onto his feet, leaning into one knee while his other leg stretches out, then stretches the opposite leg; Rowland would wipe some blood and dirt from his face as he slowly takes a step towards the enemy machina, prying his sword from the dirt. Taking in a deep breath and letting out a slow meditative exhale he'd raise his blade in front of him.

"Round two, *asshole*."

## --Seraphina and the Immortal Flames--

Below the Imperials swarmed forward, rushing straight for the frontline.

Sera's trained eye would quickly pick up a certain...disunity between the moving troops, and her frontline would be quick to feed the same back. These were soldiers who had not trained as a single legion.

"Seems they're a little rag-tag," Sera muttered to herself as the report came back. "Which means.... .....R'ishi, fan out out the archers to form a single line. Volley fire from three hundred yards. I want them to think our line is longer than it is. Longarm, are you on this channel?"

"Yes, Sir," the deep, gravelly voice of Rickard Stern - sounding, as he always did, as if he had chewed his way through an entire carton of cigarettes and swallowed a bottle of bourbon immediately before speaking. "I'm in position. I have a read on you now."

"Fire at your discretion," she ordered immediately, not taking the time to query his location - she knew that the experienced sniper would already have scouted the best firing position available. "Forget about targeting their armour, leave that to me. Aim for their officers, unit leads, anyone who looks to be coordinating them. I want them to be rudderless."

"Acknowledged," came the response, mere seconds before a roar like a thunderclap echoed across the battlefield as, from his hidden position, Stern fired his anti-material rifle at a distant target far out of Sera's sight; it's effective range many times greater than that of a longbow. Sera, meanwhile, finally galloped down to where her troops were waiting, looping around the front rank of infantry as they continued to get into position.

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Drawing her gunblade, Sera maneuvered her chocobo to stand at the front of the formation, her back to her troops. Stretching out her arm to the right, she lifted her weapon up and over her head in a slow, right-to-left arc. The well-drilled Immortal Flames responded immediately, reorganizing their lines as those in the center marked forward, transforming their straight ranks into a shape that more closely resembled a bent bow; the heavily armoured Bloodsworn at the most forward position, inviting the Imperial troops forward to engage them, while the troops at

the flanks, three ranks deep, held forward thick bronze tower shields that presented a defensive wall.

"R'shi," Sera barked as she slid from her saddle, passing the reins to a nearby soldier who at once led the chocobo away; the massively heavy bird potentially a danger to her fellow troops should it begin to panic in the thick melee, "Lieutenant R'shi!"

"Sir!" A relatively small figure separated from the more hulking brutes of the Bloodsworn ranks, the high collared great-coat and wide iron hat making it difficult to tell if the Miqu'te, head and shoulders shorter than Sera, was male or female.

"See to the archers," Sera instructed as she strode to take up the lieutenants position in the front ranks, flicking open her gunblade to load her armour piercing rounds. "Stay in communications with the rest the other sections. Once the fighting starts, I might not be able to respond. My adjutant is with the cavalry, her call sign is Ember. Once the Imps are committed, hammer and Anvil. You understand?"

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As her subordinate nodded and pushed her way back through the line, Sera unclipped the helmet that was hanging by her belt, tugging it over her head and flipped down the visor. Turning back to face the enemy, she stood near the center of the Bloodsworn; their massively thick armour making each one of them seem three times larger than they actually were. Although Sera's own black platemail was considerably more sleek, she fancied that the alkahest treated duraluminium offered better protection than anything else on the battlefield.

"Stand ready," she shouted, raising her voice to carry across the nearby ranks. "Let's see which of them is the first to try and jump into the furnace!"

Without hesitation the force charged forward, seemingly heedless. In the back though she saw a touch of hesitation; her ploy with the bowmen was giving them pause as they tried to recalculate numbers and then gave a shout.

"Magitek incoming!" someone warned Sera's men as the too familiar thud-thud of the warstriders could be felt in the ground.

The slightly curved formation of the Immortal Flames lines, and the bronze walls presented by its flanks, encouraged the Imperial charge towards its center. Here, the Bloodsworn were in their element. As the Imperials closed, firing their gunblades, bullet fire pinged harmlessly against an inch thick brass plate. The heaviest armoured infantry in the Alliance army, the sheer weight of their brass plate - far heavier and more durable than steel or iron - made for a nigh impenetrable defensive line. When the Imperial's charge collided with the Bloodsworn, it was as water crashing against rocks. The armour allowed for only a limited range of motion, but the Bloodsworn were not required to attack; wielding their massive, tombstone like axes like staves to absorb the Imperial charge, they held the line while the true counter attack came from behind.

Organised into three ranks, the Immortal Flames' second and third ranks were more lightly armoured than the clump of bloodsworn. Wearing the midnight blue greatcoats and cast iron helmets that were the hallmark of the Immortal Flames, these soldiers struck from behind the safety of their elite brethren with longsword and spear, striking for the narrow gaps in the ebony armour of the Garlean soldiers. While the disorganised Imperials grappled with the Flame front line, they had to contend with a near constant barrage of stabbing thrusts from the ranks behind. In this way, the first few Imperials to reach the Flames lines were hacked down in a spray of crimson.

In the near center of the front line, Sera's armour lacked the mass of the soldiers she fought beside. But she compensated for this with sheer ferocity. Stepping forward to meet the charging Imperials, she briefly broke away from the front line as she raised her gunblade overhead. She pulled the trigger as the weapon descended, the configuration of the barrel such that a burst of superheated gas roared out of the top of the weapon's barrel, adding momentum to the strike as Sera brought the edge of the weapon down onto the armoured head of the foremost Imperial. The man's helmet buckled, though what likely killed him was the compression of his spine; his torso crumpling like paper as his skull was punched several inches into his chest cavity, an arc of blood ejected from the joints in his armour as he fell dead.

Retreating a half step to rejoin the line, Sera raised her gunblade point first, sliding her thumb over a mechanism near the top of the handle to reconfigure the barrel. With a mechanical whirl, the cartridge that had lent additional power to her swing rotated out for live ammunition, and she pulled the trigger once more - this time to fire a round into the Imperial line.

The armour piercing rounds were designed to blast holes in Imperial heavy armour, not for anti-personnel. The effect was like throwing a cannonball into a bowl of cornflakes. Pieces of armour and flesh splattered in all directions as the round ripped through several bodies, screams of terror and agony filling the air as more than one Imperial saw his neighbour reduced to paste. Her expression grim beneath her lowered visor, Sera returned her weapon to a ready position - though her display bought her a few seconds as, for the moment at least, the Imperials were hesitant to advance on her.

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Sparing a quick look up and down her line, she saw that the Imperials were not totally without success. One bronze armoured figure was brought to his knees, a team of Imperials working together to batter him with their gunblades. The weapons couldn't penetrate his armour, but even one prone soldier threatened to break the line. The more lightly armoured troops behind the Bloodsworn surged forward to protect him, aggressively attacking with their speartips to push the Imperials back. One of them took a gunblade round to the throat for his troubles, and went down.

"Hold the line," Sera shouted, raising her voice to carry as far as it could over the din of clashing metal and agonized screams. The Imperials were taking the worst of the exchange, but they still had the men to spare.

Turning her attention back to the battle in front of her, she grimaced as she caught sight of the distant walkers. Their primary cannons were more than powerful enough to blast a hole in her lines if they got too close. She would have to make sure they didn't get the opportunity.

"Longarm, change of plan," she spoke, raising a finger to her linkpearl. "Prioritize those walkers. Handle the ones furthest away from me. I'll take care of the ones near the center."

"Acknowledged," came the gruff response, followed almost at once by the thunder-like boom of Stern's rifle. The shot was true, ripping into the armour of one of the walkers on the left flank, blowing straight through the armoured chassis and opening a hole in the pilot's chest the size of a melon. However, it said something for the desperation of the nearby Imperials that the corpse was immediately dragged from the vehicle to be replaced by a fresh pilot who, half blinded by the smoke from the damaged controls, continued to steer the armoured hulk forward.

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"Keep firing," Sera instructed. "Where are the rest of you!?"

"Incoming on the east flank," a familiar voice - considerably lighter than the sandpaper like rasp of Rickard Stern - sounded over the linkpearl. Turning to look eastward, Sera almost at once saw a large shape moving at high speed over the cracked stone of the battlefield. A towering being of slightly glowing stone, ploughing across the battlefield as easily as a fish would cross water; a Titan Egi.

Sera was passingly familiar with the Immortal Flames summoner corps, but she had never seen them in action. Although watching the twelve foot tall construct blast into the side of the Imperial lines, tossing aside men like toys as it made its way towards the walkers left her in no doubt that they had applications far beyond fighting Primals. Although the Egi was at least half a yalm away, she could just about see two, much smaller figures perched on its shoulders, raining down blows upon the Imperials as they breezed past.

Lambert Holster, his grimoire sparking brightly as he tossed out ruin spell after ruin spell, was instantly recognisable. Though the other figure beside him was identifiable at such distance only because of the tall, rabbit-like ears that sprouted from her head.

"Elding," Sera spoke into her linkpearl, using the callsign of Sigrig Faven, the only Viera in the 7th Company, "protect Mustang. If he goes down, that Egi goes with him. The walkers on the east flank are yours. Longarm, you've got the west. I'll handle the middle."

"Yes, Chieftain," came Sigrid's curt response, her tone as brisk and clipped as ever; no doubt she was already unleashing some truly brutal knife work on an Imperial that made the mistake of trying to rush the Egi from behind.

Satisfied that her elite soldiers could take care of themselves for now, Sera focused on her own tanks. Stepping out from the line once again for a swift left-and-right flash that downed two more Imperials that finally plucked up the courage to approach her position on the line, she focused

her gaze on the lumbering shadows of the warstriders advancing down the center, waiting for them to get close enough for her to make her own move on them.

Unable to break the line, the Garleans fell back, letting their Reapers cover their path. Blast after blast tore up the ground as the soldiers ran back to safety.

At once, the ground gave a sudden shudder as something burst up through the crust, perhaps two hundred feet behind the front of the Garlean line. With a heavy thud it landed, the drill-like structure opening up as some crystalline array began to come into focus.

"The hell is that?!" one of the Captains called across the linkshell.

"I don't k-"

With a sudden boom aether pulsed out, washing those nearby with a wave of aether sickness. The beam shot out, aimed straight at the enormous egi. At once its form began to shudder and scream, its cries echoing across the battleground.

Egi and machine struggled alike, each trying to get the upper hand.

--Zana and the Adders--

"We're taking the Flames west, and the Adders east. We need to make sure they don't break our line."

Sylvarre's demeanor did not betray his true feelings, at least for the moment. He had to hold it together now, for the sake of the troops and his newfound companions. He couldn't help but wondering if his sister felt the same, five years ago on the battlefield...

Before them, perhaps a good half a malm away they could see the Garleans starting to rush across the field, gunshots already ringing out from where they could see targets.

With a roar a number of the Adders charged forward, first those with lances as the bowmen lined up at the back. Both clashed, and the fray began in earnest.

Zana followed her archers; she gripped her shortbow with a trembling hand, taking an arrow from her quiver and tried to steady her breathing as she knocked the arrow to her bow, "For ma, and for pa," she told herself. She stretched her arm back, tensing and pulling against the bowstring, but she didn't know where to aim first. The lancers? The Magitek drivers? The gunners? In the moment of confusion and self-doubt she loosed the arrow at a random direction, the arrow whistling through the air toward the first wave of the enemy.

"Sylvarre?!" A sudden call from the commander. "We've word of another unknown threat suddenly in the fray. No eyes on yet but aether disturbance off the charts. Can you take men and follow?"

Sylvarre swung his spear in a wide arc to repel a group of imperial soldiers, even inflicting wounds on some of them, when his linkpearl crackled to life in his ear. He listened to the commander. "Affirmative, sir, requesting coordinates."

He stepped back, keeping an eye on the soldiers he was recently engaged with. He ducked to avoid a desperate charge from the last of them, vaulting forward and using his spear as pivot to propel himself upwards and finally kicking the initiative out of him. He stood up and activated the linkshell again. "You heard the man," He was surprised to find himself shouting, perhaps the tension was getting to him "I want a unit on me now! We need eyes on this thing, and we need it fast!" he paused for a moment. "Zana, you're with me." He added that in a calmer tone.

Zana paused her barrage of arrows when her commander called her name, snapping out of her focus. "Yes Captain!" A final barrage of arrows at the last line of enemies in her vision, each sent quickly in succession, her arms beginning to sear at ache of battle, but it was only the beginning. She relaxed her posture and went to her Captain ready to take her next directive.

"Here's your location-" Perhaps a malm to the west; the small group would be able to get there in time. "We-"

Somewhere in that location was a soft boom as something pulled up from the ground.

"....never mind, we have a visual-"

Another roar, and a beam shot up out of the ground, ripping up rock and debris. Another Captain came up quick besides Sylvarre, gasping for breath.

"Captain Jarlo here - ...orders for you to return back - we've...another threat - you take half these men and defend the base, I'll take the rest to deal with this damn thing!"

Quickly Jarlo sorted the men, splitting them in half. Hurriedly they retreated with Sylvarre, the new Captain gesturing to the remaining soldiers including Zana. All too close the machine was clawing itself up out of the ground, gleaming crystals glowing upon it's back. "All right - hold your ground, we focus fire on this thing here! Aim for the crystals, no magic if you can!"

Zana watched with panic in her eyes as Sylvarre was torn away elsewhere. She swallowed that fear -- she could do this, she was capable. She almost tripped over backwards as her feet shuffled away from the machine gnawing through the earth upward.

Aim for the crystals! Another arrow drawn from her quiver, she anchored it with shaking hands and staggered breath, pulling tight the string against the bow and aiming at the machine's back, letting the arrow loose when it showed a moment of slow movement.

Again and again she repeated her actions along with the other archers and soldiers in line, her arms screamed in agony but it was do or die.

Be it luck, or judgement or adrenaline, one of Zana's arrows flew true and struck the crystal on what must have been a weak spot, as abruptly the entire thing shattered on impact, sending the machine crashing to the floor with a strange squeal of metal. In retaliation a beam pulsed out, raking indiscriminately across the ground.

The beam began to rake across the ground, first right underneath the machine, but then spewing outward as it caved onto itself and go the ground. The soldiers around her scrambled to move out of its patch, and Zana scrambled with them. When she thought she was out of harm's way she shot another barrage of arrows to aim at the source of the beam, perhaps It would stop the attack.

Another shot flying true and yet another crystal broke under the strain. Jarlo looked over at the young Miqu'te with raised eyebrows. "...Maybe I should just send you out eh-"

An odd squeal before one of the crystals shattered, sending shards flying.

Zana manages to evade the incoming shards, weaving out of the blast. She takes another arrow and nocks it, sending it flying toward the machine once more. How much more would it take to down it, she wondered

Not much, it seemed; with a loud screeching groan enough to split her ears the last crystal shattered, and the machina came to a halt before its metallic carapace collapsed.

"Nice work-" the Captain began; only to clap a hand to her ear. "What...all right, we'll do what we can - you, come with me! A squad's gotten themselves pinned down-"

Zana watches the machina fall and collapse, a fanged smile spreads across her face. Her first real success of the battle finally gives her little ego a rub the right way.

"Huh? Oh, y-yes Captain!" She salutes and follows her to the pinned squadron.

--Zeke and Charbonnier--

"Ahh, they're not likely to see us from above if we're underground so it'd be blind bombing." He nodded, chuckling at the clap on his back as he shovelled further beneath the ground to help form their slight burrow. At the tale of crocodile he quirked a brow, shuddering at the thought of

a limb being torn off in such a manner. "N-nasty, though given they're akin to dragons I doubt you'd have much trouble." He grinned, jamming the shovel into the dirt though his expression soon fell at the tales of Bozjan warfare. "Is that where you picked up this tactic? Also Gabriels? A...t-type of Magitek I guess?"

Following Charbo's lead he began helping in camouflaging. "Nothing fancy, but I've been working on my boons. I acquired a pair o-of gauntlets and had to work on extending my charge to a seperate object, following that idea I've spent some time trying to do the same with weapons. It's a work in progress mind you, but I should be able to temporarily charge you instead of myself, only wind and ice f-for the moment but that means I can hopefully give you a bit of a speed boost in the least. Granted it wor--" he paused at the sound of a ceruleum engine, brows knitting together. "Is that airborne or ground? Can you tell?"

Charbonnier removed his coif for a moment to listen to the familiar distant rumble and deemed it was approaching far too slowly to be airborne. He then retrieved his binoculars from a belt pouch and peered into the horizon. He could just about make out a small moving vehicle, but it was too far away still to discern which type of magitek machinery they were dealing with.

"Ground", was his simple reply. He set the binoculars aside and replaced his coif.

"Wind and ice charges, you say... With wind you could give me height and speed boost. Once up, encasing the spike with ice could make it heavier and ensure it penetrates the vehicle's plating. If I can sever the primary fuel line, the pumps will do the rest; once the ceruleum is outside of its protective container, it'll react aggressively with the air, and if the heat reaches the magitek's ammunition, it'll set off a chain of explosions."

In the far distance, the machine came to a halt. Charbonnier would see the front start to raise up, as if it was digging itself in. There were at least 2 more like it further back and still approaching.

Realising what was in store for them, Charbonnier cursed under his breath. "Visual contact on three Prometheuses. We're dealing with trench diggers."

Thinking quickly, he took note of the several downed imperial vehicles and equipment that scattered the landscape between the two of them and the Prometheuses. "Master Zeke, we have to stop them from reaching us or they will collapse the road. I have an idea. See those? We can detonate them and use them as depth charges. Even though they've been discarded for a while, they're still bound to be filled with enough ceruleum to set off with a little... persuasion."

He gave Azekiel a dour look. "Should that fail, your talent with ice will become handy. Think you can create a thick enough layer of ice to ensure the Diggers have harder time to drill through? If we're lucky, they might even get clogged up."



Zeke pattered up the slight hill to gaze over at the incoming vehicles as his brows knit together, eyeing the scattered equipment and wrecked vehicles that Charbonnier had pointed out.

"L-least they were courteous enough to leave us something to work with." He grinned over at Ed with another nod. "As for the ice I couldn't c-create a layer thick enough in time before it broke through, sorry...though I can certainly slow the machine down I think if I focus on the wheels."

Sliding back down the slope to get back behind cover he nodded at Ed. "We go on your mark, ready to do this?"

"Good call on the wheels."

Charbonnier followed Azekiel and moved the starglobe on its sling to rest against his chest, while the halberd was placed on his back. If all went according to plan, he would not need it during this engagement. Instead, he took out a small device with an antennae, courtesy of the Skysteel Manufactory. From it, he could pinpoint the ceruleum tanks within a five hundred yalm radius. A handy tool when on the look out for magitek scouts during a stealth mission.

"Ready."

The Duskwight placed a hand on the starglobe and felt a chill travel from his core to his fingertips, followed by a sense of elation and hyper-awareness that lasted only a split second as he readied the first spell and waited for the closest Prometheus to come within reach of a discarded Imperial machinery.

The machines had come to a halt, slowly whirred up. Past them a number of troops suddenly burst past, travelling on some sort of fast moving cycle. A few suddenl thooms and the first barrage of mortars followed. The smoke trail followed as they thudded into the road not a hundred yalms from Zeke and Charbonnier, near cratering the street.

Charbonnier gritted his teeth when a mortar shell landed on an abandoned magitek scout, destroying the protective container and setting the ceruleum inside off as effectively as dynamine, engulfing the small machine in azure flames that utterly gutted the interior. Instinctively Charbonnier moved to cover Azekiel's body with his own as shrapnel pelted against the nocturnal shields, the sound similar to a shower of pebbles hitting against window glass.

Once the first barrage was over, he moved away and peered up from their hiding place. "Motorbikes."

The time for hiding was over. Charbonnier pushed the camouflage aside and neatly leapt out in the open. His hand reached for the halberd even as the other remained on the starglobe with an unreleased spell.

"Master Zeke, do you feel like jousting?"

With the booming of the mortars Zeke widened his eyes to look around as the aerial cartridges whistled during their descent only to explode upon the earth nearby, the resulting cloud of earth and debris kicked up in their wake as well as the force scattering causes Zeke to raise an arm to defend his face as Charbonnier moved to cover his front protectively. "Bikes and mortars as well!?" He growled in slight panic, easing himself with a steady breath.

Pushing up the hill he rose above the slope and into view beside Ed, eyeing the incoming wave of vehicles before glancing over to his Duskwight comrade with a sly grin at the suggestion. Wordlessly nodding he pushes both hands out with yet another breath, aether gradually flicking up around and twisting into a light vortex that spiralled his form, siphoning to his fists. After a moment the gale surrounding him reached a climax before he struck his left hand out followed by the right, each hand releasing a bolt of wind aether that sailed through the air toward the closest and most-centered bike.

Strangely his bolts were not seeking to make contact with the bikes or riders themselves, instead slamming into the floor either side and erupting in gusts of wind that sought to control both bike and riders driving path as he sought to funnel them toward one of Charbonniers placed mines.

A click could be heard as the buckle holding the astrolobe in its sling was opened. It suddenly unfolded from a simple disc, forming several spinning, interwoven pieces of metal that rotated in an overlapping pattern that was difficult for the eye to make sense of. Looking more like a complex timepiece than a weapon, it hovered over Charbonnier's open palm, wielded in the traditional manner of Sharlayan astrologians. Not even a second had passed when the illusion of an accomplished astrologian was shattered by a clenched fist as the Duskwight focused his energies on one of the magical bombs buried beneath the soil. Beads of sweat began to form on Charbonnier's brow and his fist shake as he willfully compressed the flow of aether to make the chosen spell—previously frozen in time—to rapidly expand in density. From beneath the ground, a hazy glow of illumination began to stab upwards as tiny pinpricks of light. The glow continued to build, like burning embers glimpsed through coals, accompanied by the rising hum of swirling aether.

As the motorbikes were pushed in the direction of the prepared trap by Azekiel's bolts of wind, Charbonnier finally released his fist and gasped from the effort of keeping the spell restrained. The result was a cacophonic eruption of light and sound, directed not into the vehicles but rather downward into the earth beneath them. The compressed aether burst outward in a firework like display of white light, utterly pulverising the rock face and instantly carving head-sized indentations into the stone as if it had been bombarded by a small-scale meteor shower. The force of the blast reflected upwards from the stone and into the riders, the air rippling with kinetic thrust that was not enough to destroy the bikes, but certainly enough to toss them around like discarded toys, riders and all.

Once the closest motorbike ceased its wild spinning and landed with a shriek of metal scraping across stone, Charbonnier replaced the globe on its sling, flexed his knees to a low dip and

leapt skywards. Seconds later the spike of his halberd made contact with the dismounted driver's breastplate, sinking through flesh and bones, puncturing the lungs and spine and pinning the paralyzed man's body to the ground. The hook and axebled ensured the polearm didn't get stuck in the hard rock beneath, despite the brutal force behind the blow. With a twist and a tug, Charbonnier pulled the bloodstained halberd free, simultaneously drawing out a soft wheeze of trapped air from the dead man's lungs.

"Take it, I'll keep the others busy!" he called to Azekiel. The starglobe once more hovering over a clenched fist, Charbonnier focused on expanding and triggering more mines, one by one, to keep the bikers engaged long enough for his comrade to secure their ride.

A number of them sent head over heels, several not surviving the landing, the rest of the bikes quickly fell into formation, aiming straight for Zeke. Gunshots started to fire as panicked shouts rang out, and in the distance the grounded Prometheuses began to slowly pivot in their direction...

Utilising the last breaths of the aetheric gale circling him he channeled them to his fists to create another set of charges from atop the slope and without hesitation leapt after Charbonnier, twirling in his jump to strike out one hand followed by the other to unleash his final two bolts - the pair of which hurtle forward with the intention of smashing into the ground between the bikers and once again exploding in a burst of wind that sought to divert their organised paths, potentially even steering the most centred riders into those on the outskirts.

Skidding down the last of the hill he sprinted for the unmanned bike Ed had managed to secure, trusting his comrade to keep the rest of the bikes at bay as he pulled it upright and took a seat. Instead of panicking he took a breath, eyeing over the controls of the bike and gripping the handles as he began to test the throttle. "Th-this can't be too complicated, surely..." he muttered under his breath, revising over the past times he had seen both Seraphina and Akiko riding similar vehicles.

Assuming the bike was still in working order he gave the throttle a few twists, planting a foot on the stirrup with the other digging into the sand for balance as he got familiar with it. "No...promises but r-ready when you are! I think!"

The bike quickly roared to life. It was old, a little rusted, but still n good nick.

Thanks to the pair of Azekiel's windbursts, Charbonnier didn't have to worry about his flank while he was busy dislodging the halberd off the corpse, and was bought enough time to set off several of the mines without additional harassment from the bikers.

By the time the Midlander reached the motorcycle, Charbonnier was panting heavily and his right hand was shaking as if he'd been doing a handstand for an hour in full plate. The Duskwight had been working hard to expand his magical capacity and endurance ever since the discussion with Mis'to at the Steps, but already he could feel his limit fast approaching.

However, Charbonnier still had a few tricks up his sleeve for dealing with the trench diggers and mortars, and he had no intention of exhausting himself until then.

Meanwhile, one of the bikers had already righted his vehicle after the rough landing. Despite the disrupted formation and lack of protection from his comrades, the Garlean figured the odds were in his favour and set his sights on the lone elezen. He drew his gunblade, a short stocked, one-handed variant designed to be fired while riding, with a thick, disc-shaped drum magazine slung under the barrel. The man squeezed the trigger, maintaining his fire until the magazine ran dry and ejected. Immediately the rider lowered the weapon to slip it against the side of his bike where several other magazines were apparently magnetised to the side of the vehicle for instant reloading into the weapon's feed.

The pelting of bullets tinkling against the glassy surface of the nocturnal shield alerted Charbonnier to the fast approaching hostile coming from his left. He widened his stance, both hands moving to grip the halberd from the ferrule end for maximum reach. He had dismounted knights from chocoboback before, but dismounting an Imperial from a high-speed vehicle was quite another challenge. Yet, he didn't need to dismount to render the wolf's claws useless...

Just as the driver was about to ram him over, Charbonnier leapt sideways and hacked at the front tire with the axeblade in one fluid motion. The rubber of the tire yielded reluctantly to the blade, but the axehead carved through it with little resistance. The tire sagged and buckled, the bike's forward motion driving the tire into the axeblade and assisting it in its carving, a chunk of the black material tearing almost completely off of the wheel and slapping away like a windsock. However, it was when the axehead struck metal that the real damage was done. As the sharp edge bit deeply into the hupcab and ate through it like tinfoil, the blade became knotted in the front breaks and at once the front wheel ground to a sudden and violent halt.

With the rear wheel still in motion, the bike was immediately tossed into a flip by its own centripetal force. The front wheel remaining almost in place, the rear of the bike spun up and over it like a lever to crash against the rocky earth, wheels up, crushing the driver's bones like matchsticks under thousands of pounds of kinetic pressure.

Charbonnier did not waste any time patting himself on the back. Already the rest of the mounted squadron had recovered and were fast approaching in a V-formation. There would be little chance to use a similar tactic this time. The gunblades popped and cracked as they unleashed a barrage of lead. Bullets whistled sharply as they pelted at the dirt around Charbonnier's feet, occasionally followed by a high-pitched clink when the shield deflected a well-aimed shot.

Behind him the rumble of a motor being revved to life could be heard. Like a standard of reinforcements being raised in the heat of a desperate battle, Charbonnier felt his spirits bolstered. With a smirk, the elezen turned his back to the incoming bikers and used the halberd to pole vault, landing smoothly behind Azekiel on the bike. He clapped the man on the back to signal he was ready and adjusted the weapon, holding it vertically as was customary in jousting.

"Take out the tire of the leading bike with ice spikes, then steer to the right, we will thin the line from the sides."

.

As the bikes sped towards each other, Charbonnier sunk low in the saddle, wrapping one arm around Azekiel to use the other man to firm up his foundation while with his left arm he adjusted his grip on the halberd; holding it underarm in a couched position, wedging the base tightly within his armpit to set it rigidly in place. The point aimed towards one of the onrushing Imperials, he aimed the halberd in the style of a lance. The threat of the weapon did not go unnoticed by the intended victim, and the Imperial rider leaned sideways in his own saddle to try and slip to one side, bringing up his gunblade to slash towards Charbonnier and Azekiel the moment they came within range.

But Charbonnier was an experienced jousting, and whether it was on chocobos or motorbikes, he read the man's movements. The tip of his halberd followed the attempted dodge, staying on course for collision despite the Garlean's efforts to evade it. As the gunblade was raised to strike, Charbonnier angled his halberd such that the inside curve of the axeblade clanged loudly against the edge of the Imperial weapon to arrest the counterattack in place, while the speed of their motorized steed continued to drive the point of the halberd forward into the Garlean's breastplate.

Perched atop the stolen bike Zeke was taking the time to get used to his new 'steed', feeling the purr-like roaring of the engine beneath him trembling through the entire frame of the vehicle as the Midlander took a soft breath, hands trailing over the handlebars and testing what they could to get a feel for the workings in what little time he had to try prevent any disaster occurring during their relatively daring attempt. Fortunately his companion was the focus of most of their shots being the one stood alone though several still zipped past Zeke as he dipped low every so often, flinching - those he was too slow to adjust himself for ricocheted off the nocturnal shield with a satisfying ping.

With the sound of screeching metal he shot a panicked look over to Charbonnier though found his worry ill-placed, glancing over with just enough time to see the front wheel of an approaching bike collapse in on itself as the axehead swept cleanly through it, staring on in surprise as the biker was crushed entirely by his own vehicle as it flips over from the force of the strike. His surprise was shortlived as another set of gunshots rung out, most piercing the dirt uselessly in small bursts whilst those with better aim once again saw their shots land, pinging off the metallic frame of the bike they had secured as well as the nocturnal shields that Ed had blessed them both with.

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As Ed took the seat behind him he nodded once, twisting the accelerator harshly as the engine once again roared to life in wild vibrations. "A-alright, on it..." Inhaling deeply his left hand took on a whitish hue, glittering flakes of ice gradually forming as he took note of the incoming formation; the leading bike, he confirmed mentally, spotting the one just ahead of most before flexing his fingers outward - those glittering fragments idly flickering about his hand amalgamate together in a rush of aether, solidifying into a shard of ice akin to one of his usual bolts, taking a

moment to try and calculate trajectory compared to the speed of the bikes approach before launching it forth.

Following the release of his spike he immediately took his floored foot away, the wheel of the bike kicking up a stream of dirt behind them as it gained grip of the ground below before propelling the pair forward toward the oncoming riders though, following Charbonniers orders to the letter he tilted the handles along with the bike steering sharply right toward the outermost units. "I HOPE YOU GOT THIS!" He called out over the engine and rushing wind in the same instance that his spike impaled the front wheel of the leading bike, puncturing through rubber and metal and protruding from the limb awkwardly, the resulting impact forcing the bike to become almost unmaneuverable as it wobbled wildly, veering off course toward the left and threatening to run down his own comrades.

Now occupied by the driving of a vehicle most of Zeke's attention was on keeping them mobile and hopefully a difficult target, watching their path as well as what he could of the enemy to prevent them crashing or worse as they surged toward the right-most advancing units.

The two wove their way through the approaching attack with varying degrees of confidence; Charbonnier easily able to cut through any that dared getting too close, and Zeke needing to focus on not losing control of the bike on such unsteady ground.

The three mortar units rapidly came into close view from where they were staked into the ground, clearly near ready to launch. Nearby them stood a tall, well armored Garlean, the overly ornate helmet potentially denoting someone of Centurio rank. As the bike came closer towards them the figure drew their gunblade, pointing it at them and the rest of the nearby soldiers turned to focus fire.

Victory did not seem out of the realm of possibility as the two thinned the line of bikers. However, upon seeing their newest adversary, Charbonnier clenched his jaw.

'Time to deal with the mortars. If we let them move any closer, they will get in range of the supply lines and all this fighting will be for naught', he grimly thought and glanced down at the Skysteel device. The Prometheuses were slowly advancing underground, but still not within reach of the debris.

Placing a hand on the starglobe, Charbonnier refreshed the brittle and near-breaking shield on Azekiel to ensure his safety, but did not bother giving himself the same treatment. He needed to save his magical energy to deal with the trench diggers. As the centurion pointed the gunblade, Charbonnier crouched behind Azekiel and the refreshed shield. He winced when one of the bullets ricocheted from it and glanced off from the elezen's mail-covered ear.

As they zoomed past the considerably thinned line of bikers, Charbonnier tapped Azekiel's shoulder. "Time to part ways. I need you to take care of that centurion. The bikers and foot

soldiers may have tough time shooting me down from the sky, but the centurion's rifle will be a problem. Think you can give me a boost?"

The moment the gunfire ceased due to the soldiers reloading their weapons, the elezen moved to stand up, using the halberd to balance himself and as not to cause the bike to teeter. "Ready when you are."

Scoping over the horizon that steadily approached he noted the line of armed soldiers with the Centurion standing tall between them all and directing orders, gaze narrowing yet constantly flicking back to the path ahead to ensure he minimised any chance of hitting debris or rocks that could overturn the bike.

A soft breath escaped as the Duskwights magic washed over him once again, that glittering shimmer encompassing his form and fading to a barely visible sheen once the barrier had fully manifested over him, relieved he had that protection yet still worried a well aimed bullet might pierce through. Looking back over his shoulder for the briefest second upon being tapped he nodded once, brows furrowing together in dismay at having to separate so soon yet aware that it was a necessity. "A-alright, be careful please!" He called out before revving the bike up a notch.

Tearing across the ground and whipping up a cloud of dust behind the bike the Midlander sighted a minor bump. "Get ready!" was all that was heard as the bike dipped slightly only to suddenly rush up the hill, hitting the front brake as close as he could toward the top of the hill to throw the rear of the bike up and give Charbonnier that leverage required for him to leap skyward as far as necessary. - Following hitting the front brake the bike became airborne for the briefest second, descending over the crest of the hill until they slammed into the floor, awkwardly veering from left to right until diving in a straight line.

Hoping his airborne companion would take a majority of the attention he sped toward the Centurion, fingers flexing over the brake as he seemed to be timing something whilst closing in on their ranks.

Charbonnier's intuition was correct; the soldiers' attention turned firmly upon the soaring Elezen as opposed to the bike, the men raising their guns and sending a hail of fire at him.

The centurio, however, did not take his eyes off Zeke, and turned slightly, perhaps anticipating the other would charge at him...

Shifting up in the seat Zeke closed his eyes for the briefest of seconds - a common thing for him to do prior to doing something relatively stupid if not reckless - an unspoken prayer within his mind. Closing the distance on the Centurion his posture shifted, left foot planted against the leather seat before he threw himself up into a backflip with momentum carrying him a short distance before landing, one knee relaxing to the floor to help regain his balance swiftly.

The bike - now unmanned - immediately lost control, even more so with the push from the Midlands backflip as it flipped chaotically threatening to smash through the Centurion in the middle and perhaps a unit either side.

Much as one couldn't see below the helmet, one might imagine the sneer beneath the helmet of the Centurion as he lined himself up at the out-of-control bike, bracing his sword as if ready to cleave it in two.

And yet, much as fate had conspired against the rest, it did here too, the backwheel catching a sudden unexpected dip and sending the bike careening into the air. Fairly certain that there was faint scream as the Garlean couldn't react fast enough as half a ton of bike came slamming down on top of him, sending both flying back and straight into one of the Prometheus' with a satisfying metallic crunch.

Charbonnier gave a brief wordless prayer to Halone before the motorcycle left the ground. He then knelt down to a low dip and leapt up just as the bike reached its zenith, wrapping his form close to the polearm to decrease resistance. He closed his eyes, trusting the well-drilled muscle memory to do its job and to avoid the lashing of winds that even the visor could not entirely protect him from. The last thing he needed was tears blurring his vision.

As he had expected, the accuracy of the short-stocked gunblades of the remaining bikers proved to be the least of Charbonnier's worries. The few bullets that found their mark bounced off the remnants of his barrier, their bite having lost potency the further away the elezen ascended and as the resistance from the winds increased. Once Charbonnier felt his velocity slow down to a complete halt, he rolled midair to turn around and began to plummet head-first, the spike of the halberd pointed down towards the mortar. Cracking his eyes open, Charbonnier saw the distant figures of the infantry men by the Centurion take aim. He felt his stomach twist into a knot when the first hail of bullets shattered the magical shield like glass, sending translucent shards flying everywhere that eventually dissolved. Now completely at the mercy of the gods, Charbonnier reached a hand to the starglobe, using the least draining spell in his arsenal. A see-through globe encased his form followed by the reassuring whoomp-whumpff sound. The gravity spell pulled him down at even greater speed and made him narrowly miss the second wave of gunfire.

By the time of the third wave, the elezen was out of options. With nothing else to do, he disengaged from the polearm and held the metal-head of the halberd defensively in front of him. A bullet ricocheted off it, but another eight or so pelted at Charbonnier's figure. The riveted mail absorbed most of the force, but to Charbonnier it felt like being a pugilist's training dummy. Although he tried to grit his teeth through the pain, he was forced to open his mouth in spluttering gasp as the air was knocked from him. He felt the hot brass of the bullets through the final layer of padding beneath his armour when part of the chain broke and crumbled from his chest under the barrage of gunfire. His defences quickly deteriorating, Charbonnier whispered yet another prayer that his armour would hold and continued to use the axeblade to protect his head and chest, his hands shaking each time a bullet ricocheted against the metal.



Unfortunately for him, the closer he plummeted towards the mortar, the easier target he became. Knowing it was now or never, Charbonnier turned around, placing each foot to rest on the base of the halberd head and held on to the shaft, hiding his head behind the gauntlets for additional protection. When he was mere seconds away from impaling the mortar, one of the bullets finally found its way through the compromised section of his armour. The bullet ripped straight through the interior padding and into his midsection, the force turning him in midair and changing his course. Realising that he was going to strike the ground, Charbonnier quickly curled himself into a ball to try and lessen the impact. He still landed heavily, though he had the wherewithal to roll with the impact to avoid further injury. However, his rolls didn't end at one turn; the force of the landing was so great that he continued to roll and roll, careering across the ground for several agonising yalms as every jutting rock stabbed into him through his mail. Eventually, he came to a stop in a heap of limbs and polearm.

During his turning, the blood from his open wound had been smeared across his entire upper body, bitter crimson droplets even finding their way into his mouth and causing him to gag. However, the desperate need to get back on his feet forced Charbonnier into motion. Putting the pain of his injury to one side, he scrambled on his feet and took cover behind the mortar, forcing the infantry to move in to engage in melee or to risk friendly fire.

Already both men would hear the shouts of Garleans moving to intercept them...

--Mis'to, Morgana and Rowland--

"Ready for the next?!" Mis'to yelled, already prizing another sizable rock out of the ground and getting ready to throw it to Rina. The Carbuncle squeeked excitedly and sent a blade of air at the next rock.

Morgana, on the other hand, aimed a shield at Rowland in order to keep in safe as best she could, or so she hoped. The man had an awful habit of attacking first and defending later.

Rowland grinned as he thrust his blade skyward and coated his skin in an aether shield of blackest night. He then rushed straight towards the beam, flinging a hand out as he summoned a defensive veil that weakened offensive magic. As the explosion surrounded him, his defenses shattered, though he came out unscathed.

Leaping suddenly from the cloud of dust and debris, he placed a fire crystal into the device on his blade. Manipulating that aether, a jet of fire sprung at a right angle from the tip of his sword, giving his blade momentum as he started to spin, going to slice at the constructed crystal. Between that and Morgana's shield, the effect was like that of a fiery comet streaking across the battle-lit sky. He only accelerated faster and faster before impact, swinging for his strongest blow yet on these things his blade clashed against the crystal. As it started to crack he flipped over in the air to correct his balance, enhanced his speed with aether as his eyes met with that of the machine, and unleashed a flurry of attacks, letting out a whole load of pent up frustration

on the poor thing. A diagonal swing coated in shadow, before he used another airborne dragoon jump to hop up and spin once more, blade glowing with light for a strike from the opposite direction. Momentum for one last spin, twirling the blade in a reverse grip as it screeched across the metal - and \*boom\*.

Rowland kicked off from the machine as the crystal exploded, middle fingers extended. The combination of his last second speed from his final leap, as well as Morganas shield, saw Rowland to safety. He'd reach a hand under his lightly armoured shirt to pull out a pair of shaded spectacles, turning away from the smoking wreck and flicking them on.

Shades may have been a touch early; there was still one more monstrosity to deal with. With a sickening lurch the aether of the area began to thicken; Mis'to staggered slightly. "Oh hell-"

With a sudden unsettling groan that seemed to reverberate through the very air, the crystals of the last machina suddenly surged bright. A scream followed as Mis'to suddenly collapsed, entire back arching as if he'd been struck by lightning; not seconds later the aether began to visibly drain out of the air - not to the crystals, but through Mis'to...

"Mis'to?!" Morgana cried out in panic, rushing to his side and instinctively calling upon Lily, her faerie.

The scream caught Rowlands attention as he'd spin around to stare down the battlefield. Gritting his teeth in a failure to suppress rage, he'd turn back to the machine and start to rush it. Letting out his own war cry he'd leap up and aim to strike while the crystals were doing their thing.

Yet it seemed someone for this machina had taken the time to protect the crystals, as somewhere from its back came a stream of gunfire straight for the man. Less aimed, more 'bullet market occupant'. Rowland raised his sword in an attempt to quickly deflect gunfire, yet still they made their way through, holes opening up in his shirt.

Mis'to dug his hands deep into the rock in pain; rock that was turning white. With the aether of the air near gone it started pulling on the two nearby. Lily spun in the air, unleashing a flurry of sparkles intent on easing Mis'to's pain - or at least, she tried to. With a strangled yelp she fell to the floor as Mis'to's soul pulled hard.

Morgana too felt the pain. She took a few deep breaths before dispelling Lily to focus on her own balance. She looked around quickly for Rowland; he too found himself struggling to stand, digging a blade into the ground for support.

"Not...now!"

Morgana fumbled for the dagger strapped to her thigh. She had to draw Mis'to's echo off everyone else if she could.

Saved by the natural rhythm of the crystal, the aether suddenly turned and pulsed out - only, again, through Mis'to. More beams shot out but this time through him, lashing out in random directions.

The let up afforded Morgana the time she needed. Rolling out of the way of one of the beams of aether, she was able to get hold of her dagger and prick the tip of one of her fingers on her left hand. The size of the wound didn't matter after all... just that there was one for him to latch on to.

Rowland managed to narrowly leap out of the way of one of the beams, and as soon as he landed he swung his blade across the dirt to kick up a cloud of dust. He took cover behind his sword, back pressed up against it while simultaneously manifesting a pair of blue wings in front of him, passage of arms, as he tried to shield himself from all sides for now. And yet the sound suggested their reprieve would not be long-

"Morgie - no-" the Miqu'te managed to gasp just before the aether reversed yet again. Rowland would feel nothing: Morgana would feel a sickening wrench as something pulled hard against hers, the tiny pinprick opening up to a deep gashing wound across her entire hand.

A muffled cry escaped Morgana's lips as the unexpected pain tore across her hand. She pressed her hands together, a silver glow between them as she tried fiercely to prevent the wound from getting worse, while keeping the pull on her. So long as it wasn't affecting Rowland, the young hyur would be able to fight and defend them, such was her thinking.

Rowland poked his head out from his impromptu wall. Still keeping behind his greatsword however, and keeping a lookout for any foot soldiers maneuvering around him "Do you need a hand, Morgana?!"

"Something's wrong with Mis'to! He-" Her words were cut off as she silently winced through a bolt of pain. "The crystals.... the-they are affecting his Echo!"

"Damn it...!" Rowland had initially intended to take out the soldiers providing covering fire for the machina. But with his allies' current predicament, he couldn't help but worry if there would truly be time for it. Reaching up to grip his sword once more, he conjured a mitigating barrier of aether, wrenching his sword from the dirt and sprinting for the mechanical titan.

Morgana fought that incessant draw of aether as much she could but even as she tried to prevent her own wounds from opening the crystals pulled it away from her. It split open further, down her wrist and across her forearm. "No!" Mis'to howled; doubled up as he was, eyes jammed shut, there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Then Rowland stepped forth. Keeping on his toes he drew on his dragoon training for quick jumps to change his positioning, a far harder target to hit from behind the greatsword. The aether he conjured was sucked away in moments but it did nothing to stop his movement. Leaping from rock to rock, high up into the air he brought the greatsword singing down to crash hard across two crystals. One, two splintered and then shattered, the machine letting out some strange echoing groan as it did so.

Something shifted in the air then; enough to let Mis'to at least uncurl.

The pressure was off Morgana enough to resummon Lily, who quickly twirled and showered Mis'to and Morgana in sparkles intended to ease their pain. Morgana focused her own magic on her arm trying to stop the blood from soaking through her glove and sleeve.

Rowland kicked off from the machine. Two crystals were destroyed, some remained, and he may not be able to jump as effectively to avoid the explosion. But he had to try. Blasting away, the aether sucking gems reduced the distance he could get away by. Two crystals worth of bang power might be the end!

Suddenly, at the last possible second, a glimmering yellow shield surrounded Rowland...as his loyal pup cast Gobskin. Red was not out of the battle yet.

"Ah! Nice save boy!" In an acrobatic flip, he landed once more, immediately rushing the machine again, throwing his greatsword straight at the machine with aetherically enhanced strength. Beads of sweat poured from his brow due to the tension of the situation, but this was the safest attack he could do right now.

With a faint groan Mis'to managed to get to his feet, struggling to fight, do anything. It was tearing at Morgana, the wounds becoming worse as they spread down her arm. It had left its mark on him in turn, hands and arms covered in aether burns from where it had tore through him. He was reeling, wracked with pain, some strange twisted expression on his face.

Something...*changed*.

He reached out and abruptly the crystals reversed, now trying to pour their aether into him. One hand stretched out to meet it as it slammed into him, sending him back skidding several meters and feet screeching across the ground. One hand to follow another and for a moment, it seemed as if something was forming in his grasp-

**BOOM.**

Blinding aether ricocheted back straight up that beam, feeding straight back to the crystals, where in turn they glowed hot for the briefest of seconds before exploding into shards, raining down on all sides. The machina squealed as metal buckled, still scraping forward even as silvers tore through its entire hull.

"Mis'to-AKH!" Morgana grasped to try and hold on but the blast threw her backwards, breaking her healing and her grip on her love.

When the dust cleared, he was gone.

"Mis'to!?" Morgana cried out, sounding markedly panicked. "Mis'to?!" The state of her arm was nothing compared to the terror in her mind. Lily immediately started mending it without missing a beat, which, now that there was no pull, was now working as intended.

Rowland reached for one last sword, drawing another paladin one from his back. He gave a shakey breath, blood and sweat dripping from his forehead.

He looked back at Morgana with a desperate glance. How he wished he could offer her comfort, but there was currently a giant aether sapping robot before him.

Rowland had to end this quickly. Leaping up after his sword was sent flying from the explosion, he'd just barely manage to catch it. Falling back down, he used quick and slight bursts of aether to hone his trajectory, readying his weapon for one slash at the crystals.

As Rowland made for the crystal, one more beam came flying out, aiming to strike down the warrior. It struck Rowlands chest, shooting him from the sky. His body bounced as it slammed into the battlescarred dirt, rolling along the ground winding him. He allowed himself a moment to viciously cough, but was already forcing himself back to his feet.

"You're not getting past me. You're not hurting them!"

Morgana soon found Mis'to - knocked near twenty meters clear, sprawled out across debris and clearly out cold. The terrible pull of his Echo had, at least, faded to nothing. "Mis'to!!!" Morgana scrambled over to him as fast as she could, Lily in tow. She had barely sat down when she began to work her magic on healing him.

*Don't you dare!! Not like this!! Not like this!!*

Morgana could not hear the commotion going on behind her. All of her focus was on not losing Mis'to; after what had happened, she could not be sure... not until he came round.

Mis'to was still. Breathing...but still.

Rowland raised his blade to guard. A low groaning scream answered him as aether clawed its way up, the beam still pouring out at Rowland. But his defence buckled under the force of the blast, once more slamming into his chest and sending him flying back, flipping over and landing on his stomach.

He clawed at the dirt, once again trembling as he fought to get back to his feet, leaning on his weapon.

"This is nothing...you hear me...!" His shouts were so loud his determination rang throughout the battlefield. "Garleans!" He'd take a step. "Primals!" And another, a step with every word. "Weapons! Ascians!" His shaking sword arm slowly raised the blade to point at the colossus. "Nothing will get through me! You won't lay a finger on Morgana or Mis'to! Even if it costs my life to do ensure that, that is my oath! As a dark knight, a paladin!"

He gazed up at the robot with a cocky and toothy massive grin. His screaming was strained with pain and exhaustion, but his conviction was there. Audible for the enemy and his ally to hear. Even in the face of death, he won't waver.

"You cannot break my shield, my spirit!"

With another ear-splitting squeal the machina lowered to face Rowland, crystal glowing as the aether began to gather, the air turning unbearably thick.

Despair threatened to overwhelm Morgana. Her mind spun; tears pressed at her eyes as she fought to focus and work her magic.

*No... please... don't leave me... I can't do this again... You have to be okay... I cannot lose another I love like this... Nymeia please!!*

The cries of Rowland finally reached Morgana's ears, snapping her from her panicked state. It took her a moment to gather her thoughts and assess Mis'to's state as logic reasserted itself.

*He's breathing. He's stable. He will be okay. Rowland needs me. I can't let him down.*

She turned to see where the young midlander was.

*Not on my time... I won't lose anyone today.*

Adrenaline surging through her, she rolled to her feet and pushed to what appeared to be a sprint and blinked from existence, reappearing at Rowland's side less than a moment later. A shield shimmered into being at an unexpected speed, swiftly deflecting the blast from the machine, allowing Rowland to breathe for a moment and causing whoever was in control of the infernal crystalline thing to pause out of surprise.

Behind them, the form of Lily disappeared as the aether drew towards the mage. In spite of all the dirt and grime, her silver robes shone with power and her mismatched eyes began to burn with a ferocious passion.

"Your time is not yet, my friend. I won't let it be."

An ethereal cry echoed across the battle field as from the woman aether began to coalesce in a fiery ball and she began to rise from the ground. The power soon spread forth to form the wings of a phoenix, shimmering like stars in the night's sky as the rest took shape. Tiny specks of light began to envelope both Mis'to and Rowland as it did, and both would start to feel their pains receding at a surprising, yet familiar pace; a pace that surpassed mortal limits.

The blazing bird beat its wings majestically as Morgana's feet touched the ground once more. The aether around her seemed to burn as she took a moment to look around. Another of those machines stomped into view.

"You got that one covered?" She called to Rowland, as the flaming Phoenix turned its attention towards the newcomer, preparing to attack.

As the healing light washed over him, Rowland gave a heavy sigh of relief, his pain receding into thin air. He quickly clenched his jaw though, trying to pretend that he didn't even need it, snapping his focus back to the enemy.

"Got that right, a bucket of bolts isn't going to determine my grave!"

Rowland pulled his right hand back behind him, the sword vanishing in a flash of light as sparking orange aether started to flow around him. Under the current circumstances, executing a limit break may be difficult with all the aether these things were sucking up. But Rowland focused, concentrating the strands of magic in the air, released by the enemy beams, his jumps, Morgana's magic, into a single point hand sparking with white light.

"Yeah I got it covered! No matter what happens, we can pull through, that's always what we've done...!"

The light in his hand grew and expanded, sprouting a pair of silver angelic wings as a sword guard as a silver shimmering blade of light erupted from his palm.

"By breaking our limits."

Down he surged towards the machine, arcing in the air with his silver winged sword raised to slice down as he descended. Like that of a bard, the smoke and clouds parted in a line above, as an armoury of swords from his collection rained down.

Morgana watched like a proud mother, raising her fist to the sky to aid Rowland with her own aether. As the swords rained down, she took a step back, impressed that he had been able to strike both. The Phoenix rose into the sky, healing work seemingly complete...

Except, as if from nowhere, the young woman stumbled and fell to the ground, gasping for breath.

Behind Mis'to stirred, looking around dazedly.

A white flash of silver light swept across the machine's body soon after Rowland finished his strike. A burst of energy erupted from his makeshift blade as the swords rained down, sending steel and magic flying across the field.

Miraculously, despite the chaotic nature of his hail of swords, none rained down towards his allies revealing the deception behind his strangely accurate attack.

A line of red hot metal revealed the sword slash that parted the titan in two, while the armoury that blitzed from the sky pierced through Crystal and Garlean alike that lay in his path. The nature of his limit break not being defined by any affinity towards a certain jobstone, by more a cataclysmic personification of who he was as a person and a fighter. A blade sharpened by that which he vowed to protect, and an unrelenting storm that would target who any dared challenge that.

His winged weapon vanished into the air, wisps of aether shaped like feathers floating away on the wind as crystals burst around him and enemies fell. He let out a meditative breath as he staggered, barely managing to keep his balance as he saw Morgana fall.

"M-Morgie?! Morgana!" Rowland screamed desperately as he rushed over.

Clutching at her chest as if it pained her, she struggled to breathe. She suddenly screwed up her face and clutched at her perfectly healed, or so it appeared, left arm as a bolt of pain came from nowhere.

Rowland knelt beside her. He's never been much of a healer, usually only draining aether from opponents to recover wounds, or use the spell offered to him by his paladin gems memories for emergency stabilisation.

He prays that'll have to be enough for now, holding his palm out to Morgana as an angelic light washes over her, casting clemency. He also whips a potion out from one of his pouches, offering to her. "C'mon, drink up, you've been through worse than this, r-right?"

Her breathing slowly began to steady, by Rowland could tell that she was quivering.

"Just... be-because th- the light... was worse... doesn't mean... this-AHssss-ehss!"

She gritted her teeth, though failed to silence herself, as another shot of phantom pain surged through her left arm. The fabric was bloodied but the wound no longer existed thanks to her magicks.

After a few more moment of hissing through gritted teeth and clutching at her blood covered sleeve, Morgana looked around, her face still reading as panicked.



"Mis'to!?"

He was still.

It took a moment for her eyes to find him. She tried to get to her feet and almost found herself face first in the dirt in the process. The aether and emotion had clearly messed with her.

He was awake, lying on his back with his hands resting on his chest.

But something wasn't right.

He stared vacantly in the distance, shivering, breath coming in short shallow gasps as if caught in some paralyzing terror.

"Mis'to?!" Morgana made another attempt to get to him, though this time she slipped on her own discarded dagger.

Rowland rushed along with her, sliding to a knee as he placed a hand on Mis'tos shoulder. "Snap out of it cat dad! We're in the middle of a battlefield here!"

It took her a moment to realise that the dagger was hers. She put it away at her thigh once more before she stumbled and dragged her way to her beloved's side.

The sudden touch and the Miqu'te shuddered, blinked, stared at the two in pained confusion. "...Ah...fuck-" he groaned, wincing. Then tried to sit up in alarm. "Morgie- you-?"

She looked up at him from all-fours looking more than slightly worse for wear. Breathing still laboured, the sound of his voice caused her eyes to begin to shimmer.

"Mis-to." She almost choked on her her own voice and her lashes started to sparkle.

"Hey-" He reached out for her, pausing only to throw a thankful look at Rowland. "I'm....ugh....okay. Not fine. But...alive, eh?"

She pulled herself to him and collapses for a moment against him, breathing still heavy. "I.... I was so... so.. I thought I lost you...." A sob burst forth before she clung to him in silence. Slowly, her breathing began to ease.

"I'm...all right...ugh. Feels...like...my fecking soul got pulled apart though." He held her close.

Rowland shut his eyes, shoulders sinking with his breath as he took a moment to take in the peace of the situation.

"Alls well that ends well I suppose..."

This skirmish was, at least, over.

But the battle was not. A low sound rumbled from the clouds above, the belly of a great Garlean warship made itself known. From somewhere within a smaller ship detached, making its way down - directly towards them. Only moments before it flashes overhead, turning round to land on a nearby clearing.

Three faces turned up in fearful anticipation.

There could be no worse a time.

## --Seraphina and the Immortal Flames--

As the crystal machine attacked Sera felt her strength momentarily drain from her, her knees very nearly buckling as the wave of aether sickness almost caused her to black out. The moment was passing, and planted the tip of her gunblade onto the muddy earth to remain upright. Around her, some of the Flames front line were also effected; the heavily armoured Bloodsworn in particular, contending with the massive weight of their brass plate, sagged and wilted. More than one of their number fell to his hands and knees, vomiting through the narrow gaps in their helmets. Her stomach lurching, Sera shook herself off, stepping out from the line to look up and down the ranks and to make herself visible.

"Stand fast!" she shouted, trying to make herself look unaffected. "I've seen the men and women of Ul'dah take harder hits from the ale at the Quicksand! On your feet!"

Had she been dealing with the undisciplined mob of the Free Brigade, she might have been in trouble; but these were professional, career soldiers. Despite their nausea, and the terrifying spectacle of the drill sprouting up behind the enemy, the Immortal Flames quickly reorganised themselves. Those soldiers less effected helped their comrades to their feet to reform the defensive line as Sera pressed a finger into her linkpearl.

"Eldling, Mustang," she barked into the device. "Report."

Across the battlefield, she could see the Egi and the beam spewed from the mouth of the drill locked in an exchange of pressure and counter-force. What she had expected to be a run-away flanking attack from her subordinates had been thoroughly derailed; the weapon the Imperials had unleashed was one she had never seen before, though the crystalline structure in its core had not gone unnoticed.

Was this, perhaps, one of the many results of the Imperial's experiments? A weaponization of the crystals that they had so carefully harvested in the Sagolii and elsewhere?

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The silence from her linkpearl was deafening. The fact that the Egi was able to maintain its form mean that, at the very least, Lambert was still alive and conscious. And that fact suggested Sigrid was still alive to defend him. However she doubted they would remain that way for long; especially with the Egi effectively immobilised and surrounded on all sides by Imperial infantry.

"...Ember, do you read me?"

There was a momentary crackle in her ear, a hitherto silent listener on the frequency activating their linkpearl. Sera's ace in the hole that she had been hoping to avoid having to play until the Imperials had committed their entire force. Nevertheless, the situation had changed and it was no longer an option to stand and wait for the Imperials to come to them.

"Hullo Cap'n!"

The voice of her immediate subordinate, the executive officer of the 7th company, M'braemha Rahz, sounded over the linkpearl with all the bounce and cheer as she might have expected had she been about to invite the young Miqu'te to a party rather than a battlefield. The lieutenant's irrepressible glee was enough to lift one corner of Sera's mouth into a wry smirk.

"I'm going to need your cavalry," Sera told her. "Mustang and Elding are cut off on the east flank. I need you to break through the Imperial lines and reach them. Abandon the Egi and get them both clear. Don't dally, either. I'm going to call on the Maelstrom and see if they can light up that drill."

"Y'want me t'try and smash it?" the Miqu'te queried cheerfully, seemingly unconcerned about the prospect of charging straight into the Garlean lines.

"No," Sera replied. "If those crystals are what I think they are, I don't want you going anywhere near them. Especially not if you've eaten. I'll try and draw in the Imperial front line, present you with an opening."

"Roger, Cap'n," M'Braemha chirped, by the sound of it speaking around a mouthful of military rations, before she deactivated her outgoing line.

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Turned back towards her solders, Sera raised her voice again. She had hoped to fight a layered defence, withdrawing across the trenches after each engagement and forcing the Imperial troops to pursue to the point of exhaustion, suffering atrocious casualties with each exchange. However the presence of the drill meant that was no longer possible; especially if the Imperials could simply drill right underneath her lines.

"Alright Flames," she called out, her voice hoarse from the hot, dry air but carrying nonetheless. "It looks like the Imps are ignoring us. Let's invite them to stand to, shall we?"

Twirling her weapon overhead, she used it to deliver her orders to the entire line; even those too far away to hear being able to see her. Holding her weapon extended at arms length before crooking her elbow to raise the point skyward; a gesture that had been rigorously drilled into the elite Flames soldiers since the very earliest days of their training. As one, the soldiers responded, the heaving of armoured bodies creating a storm of sound as the Flames infantry line began to advance. Sera marched ahead of them, looking up and down the line to ensure they maintained cohesion, the soldiers maintaining their defensive formation with the Bloodsworn forming the brass-clad fist at the centre.

Behind the infantry, the archers resumed their fire. The Ul'dah longbows had an effective range of hundreds of yards, and their arrows began to sprinkle like iron rain onto the retreated Imperial line. The Imperials had already shown themselves to be inexperienced and unorganised; Sera could only hope that enough of them would break formation to charge forward into the slaughter house once more.

Much as the machine focused on taking down the Egi, its form buckling and swelling with aether, the Imperials were quick to answer Sera's challenge, a great number breaking off to try and tackle the archers. A tactic that did not go well, many of them falling to the hail of arrows. Someone nearby would catch the panicked shout as their numbers began to turn and flee.

"Retreat. Retreat! Engage the destruct! Go!"

As the Imperials broke rank to charge towards her lines, Sera raised her gunblade again; repeating the same half-circle motion she had used at the onset of the battle. Like a well oiled machine, the Flames soldiers reformed their slightly curved forward line, several yards out from the line of archers, to prepare to meet the Imperial advance. Sera quick stepped back to take her place in the line, slipping into the narrow space offered by the thickly armoured Bloodsworn before raising her weapon to fire off a shot at the approaching Imperials. Committed to their charge, even as the arrows descended upon them, the Imperials barely slowed as one man's torso exploded under the force of Sera's armour piercing round, his companions showered in the red meaty paste that had once been his upper body.

The arrows, also, did their work. Although Imperial soldiers were typically armoured, the sheer weight of arrow fire ensured that at least some of the sharp steel tips found their mark. In the years since the Imperial invasion of Eorzea had begun, the Immortal Flames had refined both their tactics and weapons to deal with Garlemald's particular brand of heavy infantry: The thick, heavy blades carried by Immortal Flames officers, were more axe than sword - designed to use their mass to crush through armoured targets, while the arrows fired from their bows were hard tipped and narrowed to a taper. Though many of the arrow heads shattered on impact, many more of them found the narrow gaps in their target's defences to slice into neck, eye or pelvis. With each volley, the Imperial charge slowed until at last it was a far less enthusiastic assault that finally met the Flames front line.

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And the Bloodsworn were waiting for them. In a grizzly repeat of the initial encounter, the hulking soldiers, wielding axe blades large enough to chop a horse in two, crunched into the blunted Imperial charge and left the first Imperials to reach the line a crumple of twisted limbs and crimson spray. Having emptied her gunblade into the advancing enemy, Sera found herself with no foes left to kill; the Imperials directly in front of her having either been gut down by weapon fire, or split off to either side of her cone of fire after seeing one too many of their comrades turned into clumps of blood, meat and flying entrails.

Taking a moment to reload her gunblade, the blade glowing red hot after successive firing, Sera looked up and down the line. The Imperial assault had been brief and costly, within seconds of engaging the Flames, the Garleans were already in full retreat back to their lines. The casualties were a drop in the ocean when compared to the numbers that the enemy still held in reserve, but it was sufficient for her purpose. Satisfied that M'braemha and the chocobo cavalry would have a clear run at the disrupted Imperial lines, she raised a finger back to her link pearl.

"Ember," she began, "make ready to-"

"Retreat. Retreat! Engage the destruct! Go!"

Sera froze, a sudden chill running up and down her spine as she heard the strangled, panicked cry from an Imperial throat. Her attention shifted from the fleeing soldiers to the massive, mechanical construct that was still firing upon the Egi. She had imagined the drill machine to be the Garlean's trump card; a weapon they had hoped would bear them all the way to the Alliance main camp. She had never imagined they could consider it disposable if it meant killing Alliance front line soldiers.

"Disengage," she shouted, stepping out of the line to get her soldiers attention once more, aiming the tip of her gunblade back towards the rear. "Disengage and make for the trench! Take cover, immediately!"

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There was some initial confusion among the nearby soldiers, a few of the Bloodsworn turning their brass helmet wearing heads to look back and forth among themselves; perhaps having expected the order to pursue the Imperials rather than an order to fall back. But the soldiers were nevertheless crisp and professional in their answer to the order. As Sera heard her command bellowed up and down the line to be heard by all, the Flames line began to pull away.

The withdraw was as organised as the advance, though swifter. Maintaining their line, the soldiers kept approximate pace with each other as they made for their defensive position at a brisk jog. One Bloodsworn, holding an armoured fist to his neck where an Imperial had apparently succeeded in injuring him, dropped his heavy axe and stopped to make an attempt to retrieve it.

"Leave it!" Sera bellowed at him, grabbing the man's shoulder and all but hurling him after the other soldiers. "Double time, move! Move!"

That the Imperials were in a state of retreat themselves meant she did not have to worry about her troops being run down from behind. She was more concerned about what would happen if they did not reach the trenches in time.

"Mustang, Elding," she shouted into the linkpearl. "If you can hear me, the Imps are falling back. Abandon the egi and fall back on foot. Don't try to reach our position, just find the nearest cover you can and bunker down! Ember, take your cavalry back behind the rise, keep the elevated ground between them and that drill. I think that thing is going to blow and the Imperials might charge us again as soon as its over. I'll need you to be ready to harass them until we can get back into position."

"Roger, Cap'n," came the reply; the young Miquote sounded as unperturbed as she had before.

Her instructions given, Sera set off after her soldiers at a sprint, looking both ways as she ran to make sure none of the men and women under her command fell behind. Only when she was satisfied that all of her subordinates had retreated back to the trench, leaping down to join the archers, did Sera make her own descent.

"Cover!" she shouted out, tucking herself tightly against the north facing trench wall, placing both arms protectively over her head as the soldiers around her quickly adopted a similar posture.

With a low roar, the beam of the machine changed.

At once aether came sweeping in, the Egi screaming as it was torn to shreds, the magic sucking straight up into the crystal. In a heart's beat it swept out again and with it the crystals in the machine swelled, buckling metal as shards broke through and twisted. The air grew sickly and hot with aether, even a few of the hardened troops on Sera's side suddenly staggering and retching from the intensity.

Sera had read this. The crystals had been sent out of control. Once they stopped expanding, the aether would then be sucked in again. With the crystals this large, it could rip personal aether apart...

"Well shit."

Sera hissed out the curse through clenched teeth, peering over the edge of the trench and immediately ducking back down to shield her eyes from the glare. It seemed that the crystals had managed to achieve critical mass, and were not simply going to explode as she had hoped, but had grown to the point of feeding on the surrounding aether. With nowhere to run and no time to get there, Sera pushed away from the wall of the trench to make her way down the line. As some of the soldiers attempted to follow suit, she immediately reached out a hand to shove them back into place.

"Heads down!" she instructed, continuing down the line until she found Lieutenant R'shi. She hadn't seen the Migo'te since the opening of the engagement, but the officer had clearly found their way into the trench along with the rest of the company, but perked up when Sera approached, leaning close to receive orders.

"Get on the linkpearl," Sera ordered, "call the Maelstrom and tell them to light that thing up. Appraise them that it's a danger-close strike. They have to be on target. Just aim for the bright light.'

"Longarm!" she barked into her own linkpearl, turning away from R'shi and putting a finger to her ear in the same breath she had used to issue her last command. "You still with me?"

"I am, Captain," the response was distorted, the erratic effects of the pulsing crystal disrupting communications, but the granite voice of the company's sniper was still audible enough to be understood. "Although I have zero visibility on the Imperials. I can't see anything past that damnable light...."

"That's fine," Sera replied, instinctively turning to look in the direction she believed her subordinate to be; somewhere along the south western flank of her force's position. "The light is what I need you to aim for. I'm calling in an artillery strike, but I don't know what shape the Maelstrom is in or if they're in any position to respond. If they can't, then you're the last option I've got.'

"That crystal is about to suck up every drop of aether for hundreds of yalms or more. But it's fragile. If you can land a shot and break it, the crystal will become less active the more it's broken up. Do you think you can make a shot through the glare?"

There was no immediate response, but Sera did not press for one. She waited, trying to ignore the shrieking, high pitched hum created by the crystal's vibrations, horrifyingly close to her position. She knew that Stern would be taking his time, assessing the likelihood of sinking a bullet into a target largely obscured behind its own glow. She wasn't sure how much time passed - likely seconds, but it almost felt as though it stretched on into long, agonising minutes.

"Let's find out," there was the note of a smirk in Stern's voice, the man speaking through clenched teeth in a manner that told Sera he had thrust a cigar into his mouth.

"Then some time tonight, if you please!" the Flame Captain gave her final instruction, before quickly throwing herself back against the trench wall as, from somewhere to the south west, the thundering rapport of Stern's anti-material rifle rang out.

A sudden flare of light near blinding those who were looking as the crystal began to draw in aether.

But Stern's aim was true, and with a loud boom the anti-material bullet shot forth and slammed into the crystal. Abruptly the entire thing shattered, sending razor sharp shards flying in all directions. But it was the entire thing, as Stern had just caught a weakpoint. The machina was torn to shreds in the force of the blast, potentially injuring those close by.

Thanks to Sera's orders for the soldiers to huddle on the north facing side of the trench, most of them are protected from the flying debris. The dip of the trench creates a narrow safe zone, with most of the small and medium sized pieces of metal being reflected to the southern end of the trench. However, not all of the soldiers are so lucky; some few who didn't obey Sera's order to bunker down, and risked a peek over the edge of the trench pay dearly for it as shards of flying scrap metal crash into their helmets. Some of the soldiers were simply knocked silly, their helmets serving their purpose causing the soldiers to be knocked backwards in an untidy, stunned sprawl. A few others were less fortunate.

One soldier was outright decapitated as a slab of metal bigger than his entire skull thundered into his forehead and buried itself into the trench's southern wall like a cannonball. His body listed to one side before crashing down into the muddy base of the trench. Still others suffered injuries as larger pieces of debris that landed just short of the northern side of the trench crunched into the stone, splitting the ground and sending pieces of sharp rock flying like arrows down onto the huddled soldiers. Over the ringing in her ears, Sera could just about hear the grunts of pain - and in some places a few screams - of pain from her subordinates.

The bombardment lasted only a few seconds, before fading into a tinkling of metal on metal as the very smallest pieces - those that had been thrown highest by the explosion - began to fall like raindrops onto the field of metal that had been left. Screws and bolts, or flakes of metal no larger than a fingernail, presented less of a danger to the armoured soldiers and Sera slowly eased away from the wall. Her ears still ringing, and the air choked with dust, she coughed violently as she tried to take stock of her surroundings.

Down the line to her left and right, her soldiers were in the process of recovering. One of the bloodsworn had been stuck when a piece of metal the size of a door had completely crashed through the stone protecting them, striking his breastplate and compressing the metal around his chest. The two men to his left and right had already pinned him in place to prevent his flailing limbs from interfering as he used a curved, short bladed knife to slice through the straps keeping the two halves of his breastplate together before he would be suffocated by the pressing force of his own armour.

Elsewhere, the soldiers responded as they were trained to do. Those who had survived uninjured tended to those that had been hurt. Pursing her lips, Sera nodded in brief approval; the soldiers had performed their duty well, to the very last. The sight of several bodies lying unmoving in the dirt, ignored in favour of those who could still be saved, she took as a sign of her own failing rather than theirs.



Making her way down the line, she looked at the faces of the men and women she passed. Some of them looked shell shocked. A few bled from minor injuries sustained either from shrapnel, or the fighting against the Imperials. But she felt a sense of relief among the survivors as she made her way towards where she had seen R'shi - with the Imperials having withdrawn before the explosion, it seemed likely that there would now be a lull in the fighting.

"Lieutenant," she spoke quietly as she approached the unit's officer, keeping her voice low to avoid rattling the still recovering soldiers. "I imagine they can tell from their position, but advise the Maelstrom that we no longer require an artillery strike....Organise the men to withdraw the wounded back to base camp. Maintain a garrison here in case the Imperials decide to have another try. Put together a sortie to search the battlefield for any of our dead or wounded that didn't make it back to the Trench."

"Aye, Sir," the Miqu'te replied; Sera still unsure whether the individual she spoke to under the bronze helmet was a male or a female. However that hardly seemed to matter now. Reaching up a hand to tug off her own helmet, Sera reached up a hand to wipe the perspiration from her brow - her face almost soot black from dirt and grime accumulated during the fighting.

"One that's done," Sera continued, "call the rolls. I want an injury report as soon as it's available. I'll head back to command and report in."

Under normal circumstances, she would have preferred to stay with her troops. To give them some kind of inspirational speech and heartfelt congratulations for a job well done. But not today. Not now. The Imperials still had a colossal number of men at their disposal, and she doubted that the bloody nose they had received here would put a stop to their offensive.

"Longarm," she instructed into her linkpearl as she clambered out of the trench, beginning the long journey back towards the Alliance basecamp. "Return to camp and resupply on ammunition. Get some food and water, too. I want you to build a nest out here and stay there until I tell you otherwise.....And good shooting. Ember, take four good riders and search for Elding and Mustang. It's possible they're still alive."

As her subordinates signalled their acknowledgement, Sera lowered her hand and felt the weight drain from her. For the moment, at least, they might find the time to catch a moment to breath.

## --Zana and the Adders--

The Captain led Zane and a handful of others across the battlefield, pausing only to take potshots at distant Garleans. The goal soon became clear; a squad of Adders found themselves pinned against a rusted tank husk as several Reapers set about picking them off. "Fire at will!"

Zana aimed at the closest Reapers, sending a barrage of arrows in their general direction!

Zana's shots went wide but were not fruitless. The arrows drew the attention of two Reapers, who broke off from the others to attack the newcomers. Gatling fire raked the ground in a shower of sparks.

The shower of sparks flew by Zana, not hitting her at least at this point. When the two reapers looked to her and her squadron she turned to aim at them, loosing arrows at them. "More incoming!"

One of her arrows flew true, piercing one of the pilots through. They slumped over the cockpit, veering sideways and forcing the other to quickly pull aside. In the chaos, the trapped squad chose to make a run for it, heading towards Zana and her group. "Cover them!"

The remaining reapers turned their fire on the fleeing squad, but their shots went wide. No one had been picked off...yet.

Zana assisted the squadron retreat with arrow fire, the small and nimble miqo'te managed to evade the attacks of the reapers. Together with her squadron they managed to repel the attack and escort the others back to camp.

--Akiko and Kirigi--

The Garleans had fled the scene; at least there. Exactly what the two women had waited for.

"Kiri!"

Said Xaela looked up towards Akiko who still kept the field intact without pause, and nodded up at her. Without hesitation then, Kirigi broke into a sprint... right inside said aetheric vacuum. In a huge leap, greatsword raised high, she came crashing down on the crystals protruding out of the toppled giant, and... well - began smashing away like a maniac, with all speed and power she could muster.

That... didn't really look like a profound plan yet. Akiko up there, keeping the vacuum intact around the machina and crystals... Kirigi down there, smashing, slicing and hammering away like a madwoman at said crystals. Yet, despite any notions of smart plans, that indeed was all they did.

... except Kirigi, amidst her rampage through the crystals, stayed highly aware and on-guard, mentally... waiting for the slightest sign of what she was waiting for, of what she knew would happen before long.

Smash, crash - they fell away even more fragile than before, drained of their power. Till one suddenly shimmered, threatening to spring to life-

And that, as Kirigi lightly smirked to herself, was the moment the plan of the two Xaela actually came into effect, albeit in a very simplistic manner... that being, Kirigi immediately disappearing in a swirl of darkness, and safely reappearing outside the field maintained by Akiko.

Once again leaving the crystals with no aether at all to latch onto. And thus, once again forcing them to go dormant... only to start this whole little game over from the top again.

Charge in, smash, blink to safety, wait, repeat.

All fell quiet.

Maybe, too quiet.

Down below, Kirigi got out of range one last time - farther than before, and she shouted up to her wife. "Aki, now! ... Aki? Hey!"

Akiko, though, didn't do anything... yes. The final bit of their plan was for Akiko to simply indulge in what she did best, and blow the 'de-crystal-ed' machina to hell. But...  
...this all felt too easy.

"You sure there's no crystals left down there?", Akiko called down to Kirigi while still keeping up the aetheric vacuum around the toppled giant - earning a furrowed brow in return.

"You did see what I was doing the entire time, yeah?" Kirigi gestured over to the motionless machina. "That was the plan, this is when you're supposed to-"

Akiko cut her off though. "Kiri, please. Something's fishy here... we didn't even damage the machina itself that much. Yet it doesn't even move anymore. Let alone attack. Just go double-check! ... And be careful."

Kirigi sounded a sigh... but did throw the thing a suspicious glance; Akiko wasn't wrong, this was all a bit too easy. Not to mention: She was right. Akiko damaged the giant's legs, and Kirigi smashed what crystals she could find... but that didn't explain why the thing stopped attacking or moving at all.

So the silver-haired Xaela ultimately gave a nod, and cautiously approached the machina to double-check if it was really out of commission... and if there were really no crystals left.

Fortunately, nothing. The crystals were shattered. The mechanics useless.

Yet as they made certain, above things changed.

A low sound rumbled from the clouds above, the belly of a great Garlean warship made itself known. From somewhere within a smaller ship detached, making its way somewhere across the battlefield. To where the lightshow had just been seen.

"There's nothing wrong here, Aki! Just blast the thing! More importantly", Kirigi added as she pointed to the sky. "You see that?"

"... yeah. I noticed. Get out of the way then."

That, Kirigi did... and Akiko promptly conjured a sizable Blastflare, and lobbed it down straight upon the toppled machina before swiftly joining up with Kirigi on the ground next to the 'fireworks'.

The Blastflare does the perfect job of shattering what little was a recognizable shape into not.

"With that out of the way..." Akiko once more floated before Kirigi in the horizontal. "Let's go check that out. We're done here anyway."

Kirigi nodded and got on - and in the next instant, Akiko darted off into the distance with her wife on her back, leaving behind naught but a bright trail of aether in the sky... chasing after the smaller ship.

--Jalbravus--

The Garlean ship descended from the skies, no doubt with ill intent.

"Really..." Morgana groaned, as she strained to sit back up. With a sigh, she reached for the satchel beneath where her dirt-crusted dagger was now sheathed and pulled out a metal hipflask. In as fast a motion as she could manage, she took an emphasised swig from it, before offering it to Mis'to.

"We are going to need this I think if we are going to be any kind of presentable for whoever is coming to see us." Her speech was still punctuated by heavy breathing.

With a groan he took it, sipping. It gave enough strength for him to stagger to his feet; though he was still clearly struggling.

Morgana struggled to her feet. A weaker pain shot through her arm once more; she didn't cry out, but she still clutched it. Tresses of hair fell across her soil-smudged face. Her eyes were red and her lashes were jewelled. Clumps of mud and grass from battlefield stuck to her boots and stained her stockings and robes.

Safe to say, she looked like she had been through the wars.

Rowland stood up, hand on his hip feeling triumphant...that was until he heard the airship, turning back to watch its course and eventual landing.

"Oh gimme a fu-" he looked down at the puppy in his satchel. "dging break."

Morgana just about managed a snigger in response; thankfully the potion was quickly kicking in. Mis'to leaned heavily on Morgana, still huffing for breath even as he straightened up ready.

The back of the ship opened. No less than five Garleans descended down the slope, each dressed in the stylized heavy armor of high-ranking military. One carried two long, thin blades; another had a great spear-like blade upon their back. Another held an enormous shield as well as a long, sickle like blade, another bore a long polearm that incorporated both an axe and a hammer into it's blade. The central figure bore a skull like visage with four curving horns, carrying a great gunblade almost six-feet long in his hands.

The five approached. At a signal from the central commander, they came to a halt. Morgana watched carefully as the ship descended and the group made their approach.

*That.... is a lot of big weapons... I... I don't know if I can fight properly right now... Keep them talking... someone must have noticed the ship...*

"The Warrior of Light, I presume." It was the central one again that spoke, and his head turned from one to the other. "Or. Rather. A Warrior of Light."

"Who wants to know?" Morgana fixed her gaze on the commander in the centre, since it seemed he would be the one doing the talking.

Rowland narrowed his eyes at each figure. Then looked at Mis'to, then at Morgana. He stepped so he was facing them sideways on, looking around the area with swaying exaggeration. "Hey uh...think you got the wrong place..." Rowland flung a thumb up behind him "The clowns for the children's party are at the house down the road."

One of the Garleans - the one with the shield - gave a hearty guffaw. A look from the central man cowered them into silence.

"I'll make this plain. You will come with us. One way...or another."

"Sorry fella, I'm afraid we're taken and engaged. You should absolutely check out sheep singles night though." Rowland gave a mocking smirk, though despite his joking demeanour, his hands were always slightly raised in their dramatic gestures, constantly at the ready for a weapon.

"I will not ask again." The helmet lifted slightly.

"No one is going anywhere with anyone until we know exactly who is wanted, and by whom. So, I will ask again. Who are you and who wants to know?"

A rasping chuckle responded. "The Empire has need of you. Let it be known that it will be van Jalbravus that brought an end to the chaos of succession."

"The Empire is in need to A Warrior of Light? What do they need one for, might I ask?" Morgana's head tipped down, her eyes still focused on the commander.

*Just keep them talking... please, Nymeia... let someone be on their way...*

"It matters not to you." The Legatus gestured forwards. "Bring them to me."

The remaining four stepped forward.

"Do you even know who it is you are looking for?" Morgana did all she could to suppress the fear threatening to rise up within her.

*If I let them take me... I cannot guarantee I will make it out... If I let them take Rowland, I can not guarantee I can get him back... I need numbers... Twelve damn it.... please!!*

Rowland tried to make a comforting gesture by patting Morgana on the shoulder. He offered her a warm smile, which quickly became a taunting sneer as he looked back to the Legatus.

"What? You honestly think you can take us?" He took a step forward, stomping into the dirt threateningly. "Didn't see the phoenix rise from the ashes? Didn't see the rain of swords tear your machines asunder? Oho I got plenty of steam left in me, so give it your best shot!" Dirt and blood caked and dried along his face, giving him quite a frightening image. Considering their entire previous battle was a bit of a close call, this was probably a bluff.

With a slight sneer, the one with the shield stepped forward. "Leave loudmouth to me. I'll enjoy taking this one apart." With that she dropped the bulwark and charged forward at Rowland with a speed no woman of her bulk had any right moving at, bullrushing straight into him with all her bodyweight.

The one with two swords drew them; the axe wielded clicked something on the weapon, causing it to suddenly explode into a shower of electrical sparks. Both advanced on Morgana and Mis'to, as the third brought out the spear. Squeezing her shoulder quickly Mis'to let go, drawing his blade and focus. "You'll have to go through me," he growled, even as the tip of the blade shook slightly from effort.

"As you wish-" And the one with the spear swept forward, bringing the blade between the two and smacking Mis'to hard to the side where he skidded across the ground.

The other two closed quickly on Morgana. Long blades drew his swords but fell just short as a sudden blast of aether from Mis'to flung their sweep wide; Hammer, however, brought his weapon right on the ground just sides her feet, sending a shockwave rippling through the ground.

Morgana had aimed an altered shield at Mis'to but it reached him just too late, but it did keep him from any nasty grazes from the ground. The heal from it would have taken the edge of the strike, but it wouldn't be enough to keep him right.

The shockwave caused her to stumble. Her bracelet glowed purple and Ame quickly materialised to come to her mistress' aid. She didn't miss a beat in covering her in a shield that their weapons would not easily break, and neither did Morgana, seeing to it that her own was altered and able to deal a blow should the enemy break it.

The woman rushed him, ramming him with her shield. He couldn't help but grin though, acknowledging that she was definitely a speedy lil garlean.

Rowland was knocked to the ground but wasted no time in leaping back up, shoulders sagging up and down, still heavy with exhaustion from the battle they've had thus far.

But it's not very Rowland Mason to just give in after one attack. Those machines were five minutes ago. This was now! New five minutes, new fight!

Dragging his sword behind him, Rowland rushed back at her to swing upwards, following the heavy weight of his blade to jump and come back down with another downwards strike. The shield lifted to meet him head on, sending out a sudden pulse of electricity on impact. Barely did he have chance to recover from the stun that the woman swept down, slamming him into the rock before brutally beating down, a loud clang following every strike.

The Spear followed Mis'to, striking out but the Miqu'te nimbly leapt back, running on pure adrenaline. He drew his sword and weapons clashed in turn, the spear end opening up into a trident and locking across the blade.

Hammer and Blades turned now to Morgana; the latter swinging at her in a brutal strike. Her shield did it's work however and with a muffled yelp the man leapt back as ice shards shattered into him, driving him back. The gap however let Hammer stride in, swinging his weapon hard not at Morgana but at her carbuncle, slamming her hard and sending the shimmering beast somersaulting across the rock; all the better to reach Morgana.

At the back, Jalbravus continued to watch.

Ame squealed as she careened through the air. Somehow she managed to, much like a cat, twist in the air and land without coming to much harm. Still full of energy, she bounded back towards Morgana, casting a shield over mistress as she bounded as fast as her petite purple paws would carry her.

Morgana scrambled back, feet slipping on the loose ground, trying to stand up once more so that she could create enough space to cast, even just another altered shield to keep herself

safe. A golden pillar rose up in front of her, angled towards her aggressor; the purple carbuncle was determined to protect her mistress with everything she had.

Rowland was blown into the rock, every time he tried to sit up he was battered back down. Gritting his teeth, he'd roar through the assault, and try and go to grab her by the arm and fling her over into the very rock he was pinned to, and begin his own beat down.

Jalbravus watched, briefly reaching up to his comms. "Centurions report - I want our men here. What do you mean, they are pinned by the Flames? I don't care, I want them out, now! Leargo, report - fine, deal with the vermin but then I need you here, supply line be damned! Brunra - leave the Adders be and - what do you mean, you can't disengage - ridiculous! Enough! Bring these damn fools to heel so that we can leave! Incompetents!"

With a loud yelp the hammer-wielder was driven back, staggering and falling into the dirt from Ame's assault.

Rowland slipped around Shield, quickly locking arms and throwing her over. She landed with a grunt - one that quickly turned to a laugh.

"Nice try, Eorzean-"

Her hand locked around his and in turn she threw him over her, slamming him hard into the rock. That shield came after, but this time she didn't pull it back after it drove Rowland into the ground - instead a number of stakes drove from the edge into the ground, crushing the man between shield and ground. Shield briefly sneered down at him - only for a loud roar to cause her to turn right as Mis'to came crashing in, knocking her far from Rowland and hard into the ground. The Miqu'te landed at Rowland's feet, quickly turning to throw his weight against the shield. "Hold on-"

At once Blades came swooping in from where he'd disengaged from Morgana, forcing Mis'to back on the defensive. Furiously he pushed back, forcing the other away from Rowland - only to open himself up to Spear as that Garlean quickly darted around, the spear opening up into some strange pronged configuration and firing a number of spikes trailing steel robes. They drove themselves into the ground, the twine quickly tightening around the Miqu'te and driving him down to the floor by Rowland. He struggled vainly, unable to pull himself free.

Only Morgana remained, and the four Garleans closed in.

"Surrender now," Jalbravus said, softly, and you and your friends will remain unharmed.

She looked around, slowly backing off. She was stuck, and she had no idea how long help would be... if it was even coming. Gritting her teeth, she reached for the pendant hidden beneath her robes, wishing on it with all her might.



*It doesn't have to be you that comes forth... but someone... anyone... Help me!*

She watched them come closer and closer. Much longer and she would be forced to raise her hands.

Rowland struggled under pressure of his current predicament, pinned under contraption and rock. Red was wriggling out of his bag, vainly struggling to cast some sort of earthly blue magic. If he was alone, he'd crack a quirky joke to keep morale. But right now Morgana was in danger, his mind was far too clouded with worry. "Morgana, just run! We can get out of this no problem, you just get to safety!"

"Go!" Mis'to shouted as well. "Get out of here-!" The Garlean with the staff took a step backwards to strike him hard across the face, sending a smattering of blood across the floor.

Morgana screwed up her face for a split second; what should she do?

Out of nowhere, then, her silent prayers seemed to finally have met an answer.

It seemed like a shooting star soared across the sky above. Except, it suddenly scribed a curve, and three arcs of shining-blue light flew out from it - right at the tethers keeping Mis'to in place, cutting them and freeing the Miqu'te.

Another curve of the bright object, and a second shooting star, one of a pale gray, loosened out of it and rocketed right downwards. Crashing down and creating a cloud of dust and dirt, it forced the four Garleans to back away from Morgana...

... and out of the dust cloud, a certain silver-haired Xaela rose to her feet, looking like she was alight in gray flames. Her bright, palely shining eyes staring at the Garleans before her, she swung around her oversized greatsword to rest it on her shoulder as her strangely distorted voice gave a question to her friends behind her: "You guys hanging in? Sorry we took so long."

"Luckily not too long... cutting it way too close", added another - and sure enough, the black-haired Xaela with the mask covering her eyes descended from above next to her, coming to a slow stop maybe half a meter above the ground; an aura of whirling aether rose like steam off her body and drawn gunblade, the air around her seeming almost like it shook ever so slightly.

Neither looked particularly happy, to say the least.

As for Rowland... well, there was a reason they didn't rush to aid him too; after all, they knew full well that someone else was already on that.

A mere few moments after Akiko and Kirigi arrived, a certain blonde haired Miqu'te finally had made his way to the scene, accompanied by a sword wielding oversized Carbuncle.

There was a peculiar look of anger on his face, not towards his allies but the ones attacking them. Few would know that this did not mean any good. With a somewhat of a fast pace, Vell was holding his grimoire out in the open. Indicating that he had already prepared something, the moment he was close enough to not cause any harm to his allies... He lifted it. Quickly the Carbuncle would drop the sword it was wielding, doing a flip before disappearing.

With a creaking sound a fortress appeared behind him, a sight to behold. But that was not the last of it. It would seem it was somewhat alive, and mere moments later, big angel-like wings would sprout from the contraption. The Summoner, who had brought the grimoire down again, made a movement that would be seen as a command. It would not take long before the pale blue projectiles would be called forth from the fortress. The projectiles remained in stasis, ready to be fired at the command of Vell. Who in turn, would direct a Ruin at the shield that was pinning Rowland down.

"My apologies, had to prepare something." The Miqu'te said in a monotone voice.

Free of his bonds Mis'to pulled himself up, too exhausted to do little more than lean against a nearby pile of debris. One side of his face was black and blue, pouring blood from where Spear had struck him hard.

The four Garleans halted in their steps, stepping backwards as the massive Egi drew wings around the group. Shield outstretched her arm to send her tower shield flying onto her arm. With a quiet growl van Jalbravus strode forward, drawing his own blade. "Three, six, it matters not. You'll not outlast the might of the Empire."

"Funny." Akiko kept a straight face, her mask hiding whatever expression in her eyes. "Every time I hear a Garlean say that. They die right after", she said as she raised her left hand, the aura enveloping her flaring up. "Must be a coincidence."

Groaning, Rowland stood up and tilted himself sideways by the waist, smacking one hand on the side of his head to get the dirt out of his ears, one side and then the next. Thunk thunk. "Ass, I could have gotten out of that myself..."

"Didn't quite look like that." Akiko replied, deadpan. "Also, no problem."

"Thanks though." Raising his greatsword with one hand, he pointed it at Jalbravus with a sneer. "Keep trying to carry the "might of the empire" old man; you'll blow your back out in no time."

Morgana's eyes opened, recognising the voices of her allies. A sense of relief washed over her, along with the realisation the battle was not yet over.

So she closed her eyes...

... stretched out her arms...

... and the presence of the Dreadwyrms could be felt.

She opened them once more, her eyes now glowing with a fierce blue flame, and she directed her own ruin at the one holding the hammer first.

Hammer didn't have a moment to blink before he was blasted far, far back from the others, slamming hard into the back of the nearby airship. Ame quickly darted over towards Mis'to, sending a shield in his direction to ensure their safety. His hand moved to hold onto the little construct in reassurance. Between the crystal and the blow to his head, the Miqu'te was not in a good way. A fact likely not lost on Morgana with the sheer power radiating from the Dreadwyrms Trance.

A small exchange of a nod between Akiko and Kirigi as the two Xaela sprung into action at the same time - each instinctively knowing what the other wanted her to do.

"You are in the way - I don't deal with small fry", Kirigi taunted the four before her in that strange voice, a mocking sneer on her lips. She then set one foot forward, the step weighing unnaturally heavy with a loud thud. Greatsword whipping around to hold it with both hands, she got ready to swing - and blinked past the four in a dark swirl, swinging her oversized weapon at Jalbravus instead in a wide, intimidating arc.

Akiko's hand meanwhile flared up in a purplish red, and a number of her red spellcasting seals sprung into existence at her sides, equally charging their spells at rapid speed. In short order, they and her hand alike let loose a large volley of Quickjolt spells; the projectiles rained down the four before her to try and not just do some damage, but also to give Kirigi a safer opener by causing some more chaos and distraction.

Vell too was not to be outdone. Raising his hand and lowering it, about a quarter of the in-stasis projectiles would home in on the group of Garleans. His focus was on the general state of the situation, not on individuals. If need be, he had other plans. "Funny thing indeed, Akiko. Almost as if they sing the same tune. Then the same thing happens again... and again." Quickly turning the grimoire to the right pages, he added in some Ruins of his own to hold into place, marked with a small click and a soft golden flash in case it was required. His eyes darted over the place, trying to see a moment to unleash the barrage.

Jalbravus' sneer could be felt through the helmet as he tilted towards Rowland. "As if I have the time to-"

And then he got the Sulyvahns in his face.

Akiko's quick-jolts came pounding and Vell's barrage soon after, forcing the rest of the group back; in the midst of the chaos Kirigi appeared right in front of Jalbravus. Whatever reflexes he

had clearly saved him as her blade came cleaving in front of his face; with a growl he swung his greatsword in turn, sending her flying back hard. "*Enough!* Take what prisoners you can, kill those you cannot; their bodies will serve just as well!"

Setting their weapons following the initial insult, the Garleans moved to attack.

Behind them all Mis'to's hand gently tightened on the carbuncle; his expression one of anguish and fear, knowing he didn't have the strength to help.

Not physically....

"Been a long time," he murmured, his eyes closing. "...Lend...lend what time you can, Ame..."

Morgana would recognize his Echo for what it was immediately, his presence leaping straight for her. Exhausted, in pain, for a moment it might give her pause in fear for him - but it suddenly blazed to a fierce strength, and reached out.

Not just Morgana, but Vell, Akiko, Rowland and Kirigi felt it as his soul resonated strongly with theirs, a single link between them all.

And with it a sense of oneness - an unspoken communication of awareness and perception between them all. They knew at once where each other was, and where the other intended to go. What one saw, all would see. A weakness one found, all would find. Thoughts between each other were fluid, instinctive, connected through that single link - and right now, the Miqu'te's thought was a pained, but smug, pride.

No one had seen this power of his Echo since Dalamud, after all.

Akiko was almost taken aback for a moment... she then just smiled lightly, and mumbled "Thanks, dad."

The four Garleans rushed forward, but that link made their intentions plain, interpreted through the eyes and minds of many.

Jalbravus made straight for the woman who had dared attack him, his greatsword flashing out as fast as any bolt of aether and yet Kirigi would see it telegraphed so clearly that all she had to do was gently sidestep out of the way. That link was not enough to dodge out of the way of Blades however, who came gunning for her at the same time and scoring a bloody line down her side.

Shield rushed straight for her favourite buddy Rowland but this time he was more than ready to dodge, be that through his own skill or that heightened awareness. Hammer made for Rowland too however and he got through, slamming the flat part of his polearm straight into the other's back.

Spear rushed for the source of the Trance but again that hyperawareness would be the better of him.

Morgana closed her eyes, feeling Mis'to's presence, warm and encouraging despite his fatigue. She drank deep of it, using it to fuel her shaking soul. A comfort she had so desperately needed to feel. Despite the tatters, which she knew would ease with proper rest soon, she needed his support to get through this ordeal. And then there was that stroke of fear, she wasn't able to process it before a surge of strength enveloped her and he reached beyond. Morgana felt herself gasp as she became aware of what was going on around her. It wasn't just Mis'to that she could hear. It was everyone.

She knew this.

The vision she had seen of his fight in the Fields of Carteneau, how flawlessly they had moved and how intense the fight had been. Now she and her allies were afforded such fluidity and finesse, but only so long as Mis'to was still standing.

Just as they could feel the ragged state of Mis'to's soul, it would be obvious to the others now that Morgana was also not at her full strength either. Something about her aether seemed as if it were lagging, like it had nearly been torn from its rightful place, though she was not letting it affect her spell casting.

Her burning eyes flicked open once more, and she saw the one with the spear coming straight for her. She jumped, wind aether swirling round her form, flipping with grace onto the top of the rocks she had been backed against. Glaring down with blazing eyes, she took stock of all that she could see, before firing a second ruin at her attacker. Spell released, she closed her eyes once more.

One edict rang through the minds of every soul linked; one wish most will have heard before, though not from the Lady of Light.

"Hear... feel... think."

To Ame, what needed to be done was clear. Still in Mis'to's arms, she formed a small shield; the strongest that she could possibly manage, covering them both.

Rowland swiftly sidestepped to dodge his favourite shield wielding foe, about to stick his tongue when a hammer slammed into his back and knocked him off his feet. *"BWEUGH!"* A surprised, almost squeak of a sound as he was knocked over, landing on his back. Half closing his eyes in frustration, he tilted his head back at the pair of Garleans, rolling over onto his stomach and finally crawling back to his feet.

"Alright." He simply said.

A purple aetherical emblem appeared in his palm, the usual seal to cast Abyssal drain, aiming it between the two that had attacked him.

Vell closed his eyes, while initially a bit thrown off by the suddenness of another presence, he welcomed it. When he opened his eyes again, they were still needle thin slits, showing the sheer focus he required to keep going on. Steam came from the fortress, it's wings wide. The ones familiar with it would know what would be following next as the Summoner pointed forward towards the charging Garleans. Countless of pale blue projectiles began to glow, trapped in their stasis, straining to seek their marks.

The usual excited grin appeared on Akiko's face - yet now the friends were also privy to what was actually going on in her head... and what she meant when she always said that her outward demeanor had little to do with her mental state when she fought.

For a strange little curiosity had arisen, albeit to some stranger than to others: In that linked instinctive oneness with Mis'to as the conduit, where there should've been six people's thoughts and awarenesses, there were *seven*... like a certain masked Xaela counted for two. Two souls, as much distinct as they were the selfsame, feeling like strangers to the others as much as they both felt like Akiko. "I", "you"... "us", "me".

Two minds, yet one, in what was almost like a dialog of converging rivers of thoughts. Discussing impressions, tactical options, possible approaches, possible pitfalls and threats... ... and there was none of that battle frenzy visible in Akiko's wide grin; the two thought rivers were discussing calmly and quietly, yet so rapidly in a continuous back-and-forth.

There was also a strange... unnatural 'depth' to those thoughts; a much lesser-known one of the still present effects of Ria's tech on Akiko's body and mind, one few to none would actually know of.

Kirigi meanwhile took a rough hit from Jalbravus, and another down her side from the blade-wielding Garlean; despite her attempts to guard herself with her aether armor, both blades made it through the hurried attempt at defense and left blood staining the Xaela's white armored coat. Sounding pained grunts, she thought for a split-second...

... thoughts that didn't suit her usual outward personality at all. Calculated, cold, efficient, all colored with a somewhat dark hint of murderous intent - all in what seemed like complete disregard for the pain she was in, treating the injuries just as something to take into account while fighting.

And suddenly, she leapt high backwards.  
"Aki...!"

In the briefest of moments, a storm of quiet thought, a decision, a quick reaction.

"Right!"

The masked Xaela knew without asking. So she soared higher, and the wives' left hands connected. Kirigi holding her greatsword out, Akiko went into a spin, swinging her wife - or rather, her greatsword - at the blade-wielding Garlean like an oversized buzzsaw, before once again soaring higher and throwing Kirigi straight away from the field of battle with all her might...

... and the silver-haired Xaela disappeared in a swirl of blackness, only to reappear from behind Jalbravus - with all her momentum intact.

Shouting a war cry with that deep, low grumble that her voice now was, she launched at the wannabe Legatus's back, swinging at him with a mighty gray-tinged Edge of Shadow.

Rowland's magic went wide, and with a sneer Shield capitalized on that, snatching the aether with something upon her gauntlet before firing it back at him. It sent him flying back, and she followed; only for her shield to fall short.

But that was the only attack that got through. A veritable barrage of aether followed from Morgana, bringing a halt to any sort of advance. Through that link it seemed as if the aether was practically alive, homing down to attack and sending those they struck flying and staggering back, even Jalbravus. Blades went flying as Kirigi suddenly slammed into him, sprawling across the floor. "Damn you!" he screamed into his earpiece, "where are my armies?! What are they DOING?!"

Yet again, Kirigi appeared from behind, catching him hard on the back and sending him staggering forward. At once all four Garleans turned to defend him and attack - but thanks to that resonance, Kirigi was able to dodge them with ease. For a moment they seemed to waver in their certainty....

Until the Fortress sealed the deal.

All the while it had waited calmly, until Vell suddenly gave the command to release. A perfect understanding between the two and the Egi spread out its wings, shining brilliantly. Out flew those stasis beams, scattering out across the ground - only far from being the simple beams Vell had perhaps intended, it were as if time itself twisted around them, speeding some up, slowing some down, and altogether making their path completely unpredictable. They tore through the Garleans, driving them far back. Hammer's weapon splintered and shattered.

"Retreat!" came the next shout from Jalbravus. "*Retreat!*"

Vell clung to one of the fortress's arms, struggling to keep from falling over. He knew that soon, he'd run out of resources to sustain and cast spells. Worn out as he was though, he was about to give up. With the strength that he had, he reached out to the fortress once more. Though this

time, the amount of projectiles was less. Clearly the summoner's state had an impact. Using the same technique he used twice prior, there was an attempt made to prevent the retreat.

For a moment the Echo link wavered, sending a sudden wave of pain through all present as Mis'to faltered. Gritting his teeth he kept it up, though anyone would be able to sense that he would only last so long now.

Feeling the waver, Morgana knew she needed to help Mis'to, but with the might of the dreadwyrm coursing through her, that could not happen.

So, there was only one thing to do.

And so she aimed and fired at Jalbravus before warping to Mis'to's side intent on healing him as best as she could, as Ame continued to focus on protecting Mis'to with her small and sturdy shield.

Rowland gave a sigh, pushing himself back up and leaning backwards, pushing his hands into his lower back as it cracked. "No no nooo you don't!" He leapt after Jalbravus, aiming to fly beside him as he raised his greatsword, going to slam the flat into him to send him flying towards Morgana's spell, intent on not letting him avoid it.

With Jalbravus knocked in the direction of Morgana's spell by Rowland, Akiko decided to take advantage and prep the bastard just a little bit more for Morgana; she soared several meters high above him as he tumbled towards Morgana's spell, rotating to face down at him. She held her blade out downward, left hand pulling on thin air as if on a bowstring.

"You're pathetic. What about the 'might of the Empire'? Face death with some spine."

Akiko's hand let go of the invisible bowstring, and just like before, three arcs of aether shot out like blades in wide, rapid curves - quickly finding their way to vulnerable spots in Jalbravus's armor to cut into the man even while tumbling right towards Morgana's attack.

Kirigi meanwhile still found herself amidst the Garleans who previously - and fruitlessly - tried to attack her... Garleans who were now given the order to retreat.

"Sorry", Kirigi's distorted voice sounded out as she held her greatsword high with one hand, tip pointing down. "You're not going anywhere... I'm not done with you."

And the tip of the large weapon raced down into the ground, letting loose an Unleash spell infused with the Xaela's strange energies on the four Garleans around her, otherworldly spikes and swirls of gray aether lashing out at each of them.

With a low groan, Mis'to slumped forward, losing consciousness. The resonance faded just as quickly.



Rowland's blade struck true and with a satisfying clang the Legatus was pummeled back, flung away from the rest of the Garleans. More than enough for Morgana and Akiko to thoroughly pummel him between their spells, throwing him hard into the dirt. He lay there prone, ripe for the taking.

Something that, even as both Kirigi and Vell assailed them both, did not go unnoticed by the four subordinates.

Hammer drew something from his armor and threw it. A number of tiny mines buried quickly into the ground. They pulsed, once; and abruptly the aether of the air fell completely dead; unmoving and unresponsive. Sucked away as sure as if the crystal had taken it. With a sudden grating howl the Fortress behind Vell staggered, stricken by the sudden stilling of aether.

Quickly Shield bashed Kirigi away, sending her flying across the ground; Blades and Spear were quick to run towards the fallen Legatus, weapons out.

"Truce-" Hammer growled. "You let us walk away - with him. We pursue you no more. We both let each other leave. Deal?"

Morgana barely managed to finish warping before the shift in the aether hit her hard. She staggered. Near collapsing on top of Mis'to. Ame disappeared, the change too much for her mistress to sustain her in her current state. She studied the Garleans surrounding their Legatus.

"You can undo this... The drain on aether, if we agree... correct?" Her words were punctuated with laboured breaths; she was very clearly worse for where. "There... there have been enough a-aetheric disturbances today..."

"Now hold your chocobos!"

He'd cover his mouth, the shift in aether making him feel nauseous as he staggered over.

"You attack and try and kill us, try and capture Morgana, but the instant things go wrong for you, you wanna truce?!"

He'd raise a shakey sword arm to start pointing at each of them. First at hammer.  
"Compensating."

Then to spear. "Asshole."

Then to shield. "What I want to call you begins with B, but my dog is listening so we'll skip it."

Finally to Jalbravus. "Coward, idiot, number of things."

Arguably, Akiko gave the most obvious reaction to the sudden 'aether stun' effect - she fell out of the air with a look of surprise on her face, tumbling down and saving herself from a hard landing with a quick roll.

Though... something was definitely wrong with her. Where the others seemed to feel nauseated... Akiko seemed to have trouble even getting to her feet at all - and actually coughed up a small bit of blood. No doubt, that was definitely not a normal reaction to this.

"Ah... fuck", Akiko mumbled in a low tone as she took off her mask, managing to push herself to her feet after a moment while Rowland was busy dishing out insults.

"Aki!? - W-Wha-..."

Kirigi's initial fearful reaction to Akiko's bad response to all this was quickly replaced with one of grim understanding as the gray aether swirling around her was snuffed out, her eyes and voice returning to normal as well.

The silver-haired Xaela got back up to her feet as well after getting knocked down - and, robbed of her ability to aetherically exert superhuman strength, was forced to pull her massive steel greatsword behind her, its tip dragging along on the ground; good thing she was also purely physically quite powerful, or she would've had trouble doing even that much.

"... Morgie." Akiko's hand found its way to Morgana's shoulder, gripping tightly to try and reassure her. "All of you. Try to..." She thought for a split second, her eyes flitting back and forth. "Try to consciously refrain... from any attempt at aether manipulation. You'll feel better... I think."

Kirigi didn't completely understand why Akiko said that... but followed the suggestion regardless.

"And you... you fucking cowards." Meanwhile, Akiko's eyes turned to glare at the Garleans; her voice still sounded like she felt... winded? Exhausted? In pain? "You think we're... retards or something? You fanatic warmongers will... come back like... you always do."

"Also..." The Xaela managed a little smirk, pointing her gunblade forward. "Unless I'm completely off... this should affect you too... and... should be over in... just a short while."

The effects of being unable to draw upon the surrounding aether would quickly take effect on Vell.

First thing that'd happen was the dissipation of the fortress that Vell was seeking support from. The wings that once came from the fortress slowly would lose their feathers and it's arms slowly fading away in what could be best described as feathers floating away with a golden glow.

Before he could heed Akiko's warning, or perhaps, him not knowing otherwise, the fortress fully disappeared and with that... it's Summoner hitting the ground with a loud gasp. No longer having the support from either his summon or the ability to keep himself going strong with the manipulation of aether.

The Garleans clustered around Jalbravus, helping the general to his feet. With a grunt he stood slowly, and they began to edge backwards towards the airship. A sharp eye might spot that their blades were not as steady as before.

"A truce - for now." The general growled softly. "The Empire is more important than you. Than us. There is going to be no empire to return to."

Morgana watched carefully as she struggled to steady her breath once more.

"No Empire to return to?" She sounded genuinely concerned; what did they mean?

A rasping laugh. "Not while the rest tear at each others throats for the spoils...Morgana."

"Give us one good reason to let you go", Kirigi said in a sharp tone. "By the way you move... Aki was right in what she said, that little trick affects you too. What reason do we have to not take out warmongering terrorists when they're ripe for the killing?"

Akiko eyed the Garleans as well. "... she puts it... a bit undiplomatically", she says, still sounding a bit strained. "But she's right. You speak of a truce... but... give us no reason to let you go. If anything... letting you go means you'll just get even more blood on your hands... and thus on ours."

Shield gave a barking laugh. "You've two down, two on your last legs. Aye. It hinders us as much as you. But I fancy our chances of getting over to one of those two cats before you can stop us."

"Nice try", Kirigi fired back without hesitation, "but if you were so confident you could win then you wouldn't be so eager to get the hell out of here."

"I would be willing to put that to the test-" Shield was quick to snap, but Jalbravus raised a hand.

"Enough. Our mission here is accomplished. Further bloodshed here gains neither side nothing."

"I mean I'm seeing an extreme lack of kidnapping, all your robots are destroyed...doesnt sound very "mission accomplished" to me."

Morgana watched carefully, listening. She tensed as Akiko, Kigiri and Rowland's words provoked them more; Akiko would more than likely notice her shaking. As much as she wanted to defend them, it should have been clear to Rowland, if not the others too, that she was barely holding on at this point. The tearing at her aether had pushed her to her limit. She could fight no more. Nor could Mis'to. Nor could Vell. Bladed weapons were still very much a threat, doubly so with the aether so stagnant she could not form a shield if she even had the strength to do so.

"Sometimes..." she struggled to push herself a little more upright, off of Mis'to's unconscious laying beneath her. "Sometimes it's not about the resources... but about the information gained... they may be destroyed... but... but if you didn't expect them to re...turn... from the beginning... you didn't... lose anything y-you didn't expect t-to..."

Her gaze fell back to Jalbravus, intense, but far from challenging.

"Your grand plan... was... to lure us out... to... to test us further... to see how those crystals behave around magic users... to see if there are gaps in your armor we... we can seek to exploit... s-so you can shore them up before a bigger strike? Or do you intend to use them against your own.. to bring a swift end to this s-... war inside the empire?" She chooses her words carefully, being uncertain how far knowledge of Emperor Varis' death is believed to have reached. She wasn't about to risk it if she didn't need to.

"So one of you has brains." Jalbravus gave a soft laugh that crackled through his helmet. "They are an abject failure, are they not? The physical weaknesses do not make up for the raw power they possess. I imagine the VIIth will having quite the mirthful response. So much for the higher man's continued assertions...."

The five of them had been slowly moving away from the group, back towards the airship. The silencing device continued to hiss, blinking erratically.

"Then give us something", Akiko repeated, making a step forward, letting go of Morgana's shoulder; seems she held herself up that way for a bit until the worst of her condition just then had passed. "You fancy yourself a Legatus... yes? Then you know how diplomatic negotiation works. And you know we know this fight is still winnable for us.

... so. You want a truce. Then give us something." Akiko once more pointed her gunblade forward. "You got your results... and get to live. Have your cronies carry you away.

What do we get in exchange for letting you leave?"

While saying all this, choosing her tone and words diplomatically and thoughtfully - and indeed meaning what she said... Akiko also inconspicuously eyed the device. She did have familiarity with tech... Allagan tech, though, not Magitek. Still... would the effect possibly go away if they destroyed the thing?

Kirigi seemed to have similar thoughts; in feigning to inch after the retreating Garleans, she also inched closer to the device... still dragging her now much too heavy weapon along.

"You think to bargain wi-" Blades began; only again Jalbravus cut him off.

"...You can thank your eager friend here for revealing your identity...lady Morgana." The man tilted his head briefly at Rowland, and then up. "I was hoping we would meet...in...more favorable circumstances. You-" He nodded now at Akiko, Kirigi and again Rowland, "I am already aware of following your attempt on our Thanalan operations. You are....aware of the source and nature of these crystals, yes?"

Akiko... took a second before she responded. And she chose her words carefully; no need to reveal too much of what they knew... only enough to make him go on.

"... we know what they're loose imitations of", she said after a moment. "And how they function on an aetherological level."

Rowland blinked, glancing at Jalbravus, then at Morgana. With a nervous chuckle, he'd slip a finger under his collar to gently tug. "Oh. Haha...wow uh. Oops."

He'd turn his attention back to the boss man. "They suck and blow aether! Like batteries, but deadlier!"

Kirigi glanced at Rowland with a disappointed big sister look.

Rowland glanced back, shrugging. He knew he was right.

Uncertainty flicked across Morgana's face at Jalbravus' choice of address; not even Gaius van Baelsar referred to her with such respect (not that she expected it) and they worked together. She made mental note as best as she could in her adrenaline and exhaustion-ridden brain.

"And what of it, van Jalbravus?" She took the the risk, given his armor looked as austentatious as Gaius and Regula's; though he has mentioned the name, he had not introduced himself in so many words.

"Were you able to recreate it?" The smirk was clear.

"... yes and no." Akiko's response stayed calm and collected; the smirk had no effect on her. "I have methods to create more from existing samples in whatever desired quantity. But there is some component required for independent replication of those crystals. That much I know.

I just don't know that component."

... she likely didn't exactly make the impression of someone Jalbravus could tell a false component to and get away with it, mind you.

Carefully, Jalbravus clicked something upon his arm.

Hammer reached out. "Sir, are you-"

"A fair trade for our lives." A small vial, perhaps the size of an egg, appeared out into his waiting palm. "Or perhaps you fancy continuing to tangle with the Warrior of Light and her friends?"

"The anti-magi-"

"Has a finite lifespan. As I recall." Jalbravus turned meaningfully to the other, who finally backed down. "Now. As for what I offer."

He held the vial high. Within was a crystal. The similarity to the ones of Akiko's study would immediately be apparent to her. And yet, there was a quality to it absent from before. A certain inner light, a regularity to the fractal patterns, that suggested...

"I believe you may have been looking for the likes of this."

"... a mother crystal then, so to speak." Akiko couldn't help but make that remark with a light smirk.

Morgana's eyes widened at the sight of it. Something danced on the edges of her memory, like the recollection of a dream.

But that memory was lost as Akiko spoke.

Yes... a fitting description...

Rowland had admittedly had not been paying too much attention to the studies of the crystals. He raised his brow in surprise that not only was Akiko apparently trying to recreate them, but that the missing component required was just being handed over.

He was a bit of a taunting shit, but he was full prepared to just let them go at this point. Woo, free crystal.

"...So now we all kiss and make up?"

"No kissing," van Jalbravus said with a slight chuckle. "But, yes. I offer this in exchange. No doubt you ask why you cannot simply take it and then kill me anyway. If you must. Perhaps my death will serve to galvanize the Garleans into realizing your dishonorable threat."

"I... for one... would rather not reinforce the savage stereotype they take us for..." Morgana said firmly though laboured breaths.

"... well. Aside from that." Akiko's eyes flitted between Morgana and Jalbravus. "Any sign of us trying to kill you would just prompt you to destroy it, likely."

Akiko had switched to speaking very openly, albeit still calmly; at this point, she was actually quite interested in this deal, albeit staying perfectly relaxed on the outside... it stood to reason Jalbravus wasn't fully aware what Akiko could actually accomplish with that object in her possession.

... but...

"There is one thing remaining though", the Xaela said... she lowered her gunblade, and took slow steps forward. "You could very well be trying to trick us into accepting a fake. Or some other useless object.

Needless to say... I'd like to verify that it is real - so here's the deal." Akiko gave Jalbravus a nod of her chin. "You don't have to let it out of your hand for me to confirm it. But that device back there would have to be off. If I then find it's the genuine article... you're all free to go.

... fair?", she asked, a calm expression on her face as she stared at Jalbravus; the other four Garlean brutes only existed in her perception for threat assessment right now.

"Fair."

And, with a touch of hesitation, Hammer clicked something on his glove. The anti-magic shell dropped.

In that instant, Akiko took a deep breath... and with a light smile, put her mask back on. She also sheathed her gunblade away, even; not that she wasn't a massive threat even without a sword, but still. It was a gesture...

... one primarily meant for the others, not so much Jalbravus.

Kirigi meanwhile suddenly found herself 'over-lifting' her now light-feeling greatsword... and after glancing back and forth between Jalbravus and Akiko for a bit, grudgingly made the large weapon disappear, standing straight with crossed arms. "Tsk..."

Vell would slowly lift himself off the ground, being thankful he was not wearing his glasses at the moment. The Miqu'te looked like he hadn't slept a night as he looked up. Deciding to remain quiet for the moment, he took the time to clean himself off. Making sure there was no dirt on his face. He wasn't quite sure what was going on at the moment but to him, it was better to remain silent and watch it unfold.

A faint groan came from Mis'to. Not entirely conscious, but at least moving.

As the aether shifted once more, the rush cause Morgana's arms to give, she fell atop Mis'to once more. Breathing still laboured, she didn't try and move again; laying there quietly, a relieved smile crept across her features as she felt her soulmate's chest rise and fall. The faint groan only caused her to cling to him slightly tighter... at least as best as she could manage.

"So we have an accord?" Jalbravus held out the crystal quite steadily, even with Akiko's prodding.

"You going to come back and try this again geezer?" He had lowered his guard, still gripping his weapon in a low stance however as he stared at Jalbravus.

"No. I will leave this battleground to the whims of the VIIth." The distaste in his voice was clear.

To that question of Jalbravus's, Akiko could've indeed answered: Yes...  
... she had taken enough steps forward now. Not that she needed to come closer for purposes of reading that crystal... but she wanted to have the device on the ground to be behind her.  
So, yes... she was content now.

No need for Jalbravus to know why though; so instead, ignoring that little exchange to just stay on topic, she nodded. "You'll just have to hold it still for a moment", she said curtly. "Nothing more. And don't mind a few flashes that might be seen briefly between us two... it won't be an attack. Just a safety measure if it's needed.

Now then..."

With those words... well, Akiko did her usual thing - albeit with more cautiousness than usual. Any aether-sensitive among those present could tell when those many very thin tendrils of aether extended out of Akiko... invisible to the naked eye. Their ends all closing in on the crystal contained in its vial, held up by Jalbravus.

A slight moment of pause, though... Akiko held her left hand up, fingers as if ready to snap, the faintest light sparking between them; after all, these crystals were very hazardous. If need be, Akiko had to be ready to cut contact with the crystal the very instant she had her split-second reading.

... she was also, in the back of her mind, preparing for swift execution of the final step further down the line - the last safety measure to be taken at the very end.

Being prepared then, the tendrils' ends closed in and made contact with the crystal within its vial... and Akiko never had to use that safety measure, her hand lowering, the sparking light fading from her fingers. No threat to Akiko coming from the remarkably stable crystal, she got the reading she wanted.

The tendrils retracted and Akiko nodded - at much as Jalbravus as to signal the others that this was not a trick.

This crystal truly was the real thing.



"... right then. You've been honest", Akiko said to Jalbravus; she didn't approach him though. Rather, she had a simple instruction for him. "Then if all is clear for us both. Hold it out before you upon your flat palm."

After a few moments, Morgana shifted her head so she could see Akiko, Jalbravus and the crystal. That memory of a dream sensation began to pick up in her. As she focused as best she could on the crystal, the thoughts in her head began to slowly but surely become clearer.

If... if that's what I think it is... I...

Twitching, her leg curled closer and she shakily pushed up with her arms so that she was sitting, instead of lying over Mis'to. Sat back far enough to free her hands, one rested on Mis'to's dusty hair, while the other was clutched to her breast, fingers seeking the pendant hidden beneath, almost as if a source of comfort. She continued to watch and focus on keeping her breathing steady, even as a dark dizziness feeling threatened the edges of her vision.

For a split second there is a drop in her gaze, as if she may pass out, followed by a small gasp, akin to one awaking from a nightmare. She appears to return her concentration to where it was before, upon the crystal in Jalbravus' hand, as if nothing happened.

Jalbravus held out the crystal on his palm. "Very well." He gestured at the other four to walk back. They did so, very reluctantly.

But Akiko was too cautious of Garleans to just trust Jalbravus - too cautious of the Empire and its... nature.

She then moved quickly, albeit while making sure her movements came off as defensive in nature.

She'd not grab the crystal with her hand, but rather go for having it float to her, upon which she'd quickly place a spherical shield around it.

From there, she'd immediately flip away backwards, the shield-encased crystal following her, at the same time as her gunblade would loosen from her back - it wouldn't at all fly at the Garleans though... rather, it would head right for the device on the ground to try and destroy it.

Perhaps more out of instinct rather than any desire to betrayal, the moment Akiko backflipped and threw her gunblade Shield quickly stepped in front of Jalbravus, her weapon opening up into a giant towershield that quickly covered them both while Blades threw out a scythe of energy after the moving Au Ra, clipping her just as she landed. The other two took up defensive positions, until it became clear that her move wasn't an attack.

Jalbravus' rasping laughter echoed. "How untrusting....I suppose that is deserved."

"Akik-ahnn!!" Morgana called at her, clearly furious that she was the one to make a move like she was breaking the fragile truce, but the end of her shout was cut off by the clouds coming across her mind. One hand flew to her head, while the other tried to steady herself wherever it

fell, and her breath became laboured once more. It looked as if she were about to have a vision, but the sensation not hitting the others was a clear indication that this was not the case.

Kirigi was quick to try and rush to Akiko's defense - not quick enough though; she could only take a defensive position in front of her after her wife already took the hit. "Aki! The fuck!?"

"... sorry... but. Couldn't help it. Call it a war orphan's instincts...", Akiko responded quietly, the side of her upper arm's armor just somewhat bloodstained.

Kirigi sounded a sigh in response, eyes on the Garleans in front of them.

Regardless though - the cut aside, the result was what Akiko wanted; the device was no threat, and the crystal was safely at Akiko's side and protected. Not like she tended to bleed a lot anyway... and pain, she could deal with.

"... that's that then." The Xaela got up to stand straight. "Deal's done. You may leave now."

"Very well." Jalbravus turned to head back to the airship; the four Garleans followed.

The back of the airship closed as they walked inside, the ceruleum thrusters powering up.

"I was about to say what were you doing but... That's too late now. So what was the action for? That could've ended so badly." The Seeker sat down on the place where he was initially laying down at.

Akiko sighed deeply... and legitimately turned around to the others to perform an Eastern bow, the shielded vial with the crystal floating next to her. "I'm sorry. I was just... worried. About getting the crystal. And about all of you.

Bait me with the crystal... attack at the last second. Reactivate the device... leaving us defenseless to an attack from the airship.

There's many things they could've tried... and I'll turn into a Hrothgar before I trust a Garlean terrorist", she said, a decent helping of distaste in her voice.

Kirigi meanwhile stayed on-guard, eyeing the airship closely.

With a faint groan Mis'to stirred. "...Ugh - fuck."

And, as he came to, that darkness overcame Morgana, and she collapsed on top of him.

Rowland watched as Jalbravus and his lackeys left for their airship, giving an irritated sigh as the tension of the situation elevated. Sheathing his weapon, he'd link his arms together and stretched them, first to the left, then the right.

"Right...I think that's the last surprise we have to deal with for today. Hopefully, at least. Is everyone alright?"

Kirigi still kept her eyes on the airship while responding to Rowland.

"I'm wounded, but it's nothing too bad... just hurts. So nothing to worry about. And how are you holding up, Rowland...? And Vell?"

"... aside from that cut. Nothing, really", Akiko said; she was already on the way over to Morgana and Mis'to, kneeling down next to them.

"Hey..." She gave Mis'to a lopsided smile. "She's a lot worse for wear, hm... and you? You were unconscious... need anything, dad?"

"Next to eating dirt, I'm as fine as I can be... despite the exhaustion. But that is a given."

"Oh..." He winced faintly, gently closing his eyes and holding Morgana close. "I'd...kill...for a sake..right now..." He was quiet a moment, just resting, until he tilted his head.

"Strange...I....what...is that I'm...sensing..."

Her breathing was regular, thankfully, though her body was limp in his arms.

Vell's ears flicked as he picked up what was said, turning his head towards both Mis'to and Morgana. Noticing that the latter was out cold, the Seeker was quite concerned. "Hey... What's going on?"

"I..." Mis'to flinched slightly, his eyes darting madly to and fro as if searching for something.

"She's just very exhausted, Vell", Akiko responded calmly, throwing the Miko'te a light smile.

"Her breathing is fine. Don't worry. And, dad..."

... you're probably sensing this?" Akiko turned to face Mis'to again; the crystal in its vial, visible through the translucent blue spherical shield still around it, floated around the Xaela's side so Mis'to could see it before him. "Got this from Jalbravus... in exchange for his life. I made sure, and it's... well. The original."

Kirigi meanwhile walked over to Rowland to check her friend's injuries.

Rowland seemed rather cut up and bruised from his activities throughout the day, but he wasn't about to let that bother him, he had something more important to do first. Rowland went up to pat Vell on the head "I dont recommend eating dirt, it'll make you sick."

Important thing done, he now turned to Kirigi. "I'm dying."

Tiredly, Mis'to looked up at Akiko. "Might be? Feels like some...itch in the back of my brain-"

At once he clasped his hands to his head and screamed.

The sound was inhuman, nothing that a normal man should be able to make, and heedless of Morgana sprawled across him Mis'to threw himself back, twisting and writhing as nails dug hard enough into his head to draw blood. Abruptly his Echo reached out, and where before it had been a quiet presence now it was as if a thousand screaming shards of glass tore and scoured at the soul, raking for precious aether. Thin cuts opened on the arms and legs of all present, the blood running towards the stricken Miqu'te as he continued to be wracked by spasms, that howling scream unceasing.

In the vial the crystal rattled, shuddering.

Akiko was totally taken aback for a split-second, assailed by the sudden huge drain on her -

"AKI!! MOVE!!"

- but Kirigi shouting at her snapped her out of it. She jumped - no, rocketed - backwards a good fifteen or twenty meters, crystal following her, and put an aetheric vacuum around it immediately; she even hid the thing behind her back just to even get it out of Mis'to's line of sight, more just on top out of reflex than out of any sound reason.

The sound of her lover's scream pulled her from her dream with a loud gasp. Her eyes darted from Mis'to to Akiko and back. Her skin began to prickle as tiny tears appeared across her dirt-caked skin, droplets of blood pooling in each one. She wanted to cry out, but she had no time; the sheer adrenaline coursing once again through her veins would not let her.

"No!!" Both hands went straight for the Miqu'te's face, fingers spread to cover as much flesh as she could reach in attempt to counteract the leather gloves she did not have time to remove.

Neither hiding the crystal, nor the aetheric vacuum did anything to reduce the screams from Mis'to, nor the pain afflicting everyone else. Pushing her focus for all it was worth, aether thrummed through where skin met skin hard. It took what felt like an eternity of agony before the sound of Mis'to's cries faded, now out cold, thanks to Morgana's lightning instincts.

Her attention flicked back to Akiko, her mismatched eyes wide. Breaths came heavy, nostrils flaring and teeth bared, as if snarling like an animal. She was furious.

"What... have you... done? Get... that thing as far away from here as possible... And I don't mean to Her Embrace!"

"What have I done...!? How should I have predicted this!?", Akiko called back, still really, really damn confused. "And what do you mean, not Her Embrace! My vault there is the only safe place for it!"

Rowland bit down on his cheek to avoid screaming. He can usually tolerate pain, but his arms and legs splitting open with wounds so suddenly was definitely a shock.

"Both of you!" He marched over to Morgana and Akiko.

"Quit it! Morgana, she couldn't have known that would happen. Akiko, it doesn't matter what you do with it later; clearly it has a negative effect on Mis'to, so get it away from him for now." He paid each of them another glance, pausing so they could take in what he was saying before he continued. "And so help me if it proves more trouble than its worth and causes further argument, I'll destroy it without hesitation."

Vell pressed his hands against his ears, trying to stop the sound from reaching his ears. Much to the seeker's dismay, it was not a sound he could block out that easily. He was trying his best to not outright scream due to the sound, causing him to remain silent. Thankfully, he was sitting or he would have collapsed again. Heavy breaths came from him, as he'd try to stay in his sitting position.

Eyes growing wide as he saw small cuts appearing on his arm and other spots where his skin was exposed.

"How could you have known?" Morgana paid Rowland no heed, determined to make sure Akiko knew what was on her mind. "Perhaps with how Mis'to has reacted literally every other time he has been around such things? Initiative should have at least suggested that the real thing would be much more potent if nothing else! Not to mention, even with your shrewd analysis Jalbravus could have been out to trick you and get us all killed."

*He may have still managed that...*

Tears mingled with dust and blood as tears meandered down her cheeks. Her breathing was once again shaky and erratic as she glared daggers towards Akiko.

"That thing is not to be anywhere near Mis'to under ANY circumstances until further notice? Do I make myself clear?"

Next she turned to Rowland.

"And don't you even THINK of destroying it, young man. If...If that is..." Her tone finally started to descend as she forced herself to slow; the panic she was feeling was evident. "... what I believe it is... it... it's older than... the Source..."

Her gaze fell to Mis'to. Shaking, she ran her fingers through his dust-covered hair.

*I... I can't let him find you...*

"Hey, don't tell me - I'm not the one who snapped-" Akiko didn't get further than that though in response to Rowland, seeing as Morgana already kept going. She didn't even try to interrupt her, nor did she... honestly, she didn't look angry or upset - judging by how she stood there, where she faced, and the expression on that face, she had far more interest in Mis'to and Vell than in Morgana's rant.

Rather, when Akiko wanted to respond after waiting for Morgana to finish, she couldn't - because it was instead Kirigi who got upset and fired back.

"I'm sorry, but let me be real for a second, Morgana...", the silver-haired Xaela said, a glare in her eyes to rival that of Morgana herself, "... put a darn sock in it. You act like you're the only one here who's stressed or in pain or afraid for people you care about - newsflash, we all are! Newsflash, literally most of us bleeding as we stand here-"

"K-Kiri, stop that-"

"I'm not done!", Kirigi hissed back at Akiko when the latter interrupted, before turning back to Morgana; be it her wounds, the shocking events of the last minutes, or whatever else... but it seemed Morgana wasn't the only one whose nerves were a bit too worse for wear. "I mean, heck, far as I know, you scolded Aki for this same damn behavior of yours right now back when I was kidnapped! Does it even reach your brain that he's like a big brother to her and she was probably scared shitless just now even without your incessant, condescending fucking angry-mom-routine!? What kind of special do you think you are to talk to people in that tone! People who came here to risk their asses 'cause they were scared you're hurt!? Don't know what sort of ego issues you got, but-"

"Kirigi! I said stop!!"

Only at that stern, loud interruption from Akiko did Kirigi finally stop her rant, which had descended into straight-up shouting; the silverhead only now noticed her own anger, her own racing breath and clenched fists. In realization, she turned around and walked a few steps, hands clutching her now much more fiercely burning wounds, trying to collect herself with a few deep breaths.

Akiko meanwhile turned to Morgana, speaking calmly.

"Being now allowed to speak for myself..." Akiko sounded a light sigh. "I am not okay with the tone you take, yes. I'm no child for you to scold. But", she went on right away to preclude an interruption. "We're all a bit worse for wear right now... soaring emotions can be overlooked. Hope you can do that for Kirigi as I do for you", she added, still in a very calm tone; Kirigi herself gave no reaction to that.

"And there's more important matters", Akiko went on, keeping herself brief. "I'll leave via Aetheryte to bring this thing away. Then I'll head to HQ and safely escort some people your way to help... if that's all good. Then I'll leave now."

"Young man?" Rowland screwed his mouth, not really raising his voice, but clearly not exactly pleased with her response either. "You know I'm your team mate right? Meant to walk along side you as a friend and equal. But people keep treating me as a child until suddenly a giant war machina needs blowing up, then I'm used as a human shield... not that I mind being on the front line. But think of me what you will I suppose, I don't give a qiqirns ass what that crystal is, or how old it is, or where it comes from. If it not only physically harms others, but also tears people's friendships apart, I'll do something about it." He kicked some rubble, sending dust and rock scattering up as he turned to Akiyu in a sulk. "Thank you for taking care of it, it's appreciated. Really. Everyone's just tired and frustrated..."

For the time they berated her, she was quiet, but when silence fell between them, Morgana gently shifted Mis'to from her lap. The time had afforded a moment to recompose herself, but barely and badly, despite the shouting.

She didn't care if they were upset at her. What mattered was that the world she loved didn't burn, or worse.

"If I was treating you as a child, Rowland... I would have called you boy..."

She shifted, attempting to get to her feet.

"I don't think..."

The loose stones rolled beneath the soles of her boots...

"don't think any of you..."

She stumbled, her breaths still heavy and laboured.

"...have any idea just..."

Her head spun.

"...just how much is at stake..."

She reached for the pendant beneath her robes...

"It's... it... is worse than..."

... for but a moment before letting go.

“...than... we have seen until now...”

She stumbled, clutching her head.

“Worse than Bahamut.”

On she went...

“Worse than the Light...”

...one foot after the other, towards Kigiri.

“I cannot...”

Her foot dragged...

“I... will not...”

... another stumble...

“I must not...”

She stopped.

“I...”

The stones shifted, and her legs gave way, as did yet another weak flood of tears.

“I... I can't... not... not again... not to a fate... worse than death...”

Watching it unfold from his position, Vell had uncovered his ears once he realized the sound would not stop.

“You are right...” his voice was pained.

“However. How were we supposed to... know...” A slight hiss escaped from under his breath.

“The situation... is not to be... underestimated. That is for sure...” He was supporting his head with a one of his hands.

“But right now... It is NOT the time... let emotions rise...!”

The sudden hum of a linkpearl interrupted the heated scene.



"We have visual on a full retreat - anyone copy?"

Kirigi turned around when Morgana approached her, and caught the stumbling Warrior of Light in her arms; she hissed slightly through her teeth at her burning wounds, but still held the Hyur woman upright as carefully as she could manage.

Akiko meanwhile quietly let Morgana finish... before raising a finger to the side of her head; she had words for her friend, but someone needed to respond to that call.

"First Storm Lieutenant Akiko Sulyvahn speaking. Confirming status. Morgana Browne, Mis'to Raesthe, Rowland Mason, Kirigi Sulyvahn, Vell... Rivier and myself are here together.

Jalbravus and his escorts retreated after we engaged them. Further confirming multiple war machina destroyed by assigned teams and heavy enemy losses. No further hostiles in our vicinity.

We're all alive, but we have wounded. Group will stay put and I'll shortly be at HQ to escort medics and transport to their position. Need you prepared shortly. You copy?"

After quickly waiting for a response and confirming, Akiko lowered her hand again... and took her mask off to look Morgana in the eyes from a distance.

"Morgana. Look at me", she said loud and clear, making sure she had the redhead's attention.

"We heard. We never said we weren't listening. Or that we don't care. Or don't trust you. Or aren't with you. All we're saying is...

... we know a lot weighs on you... and sometimes you're shouldering all the world. You lost things you'll never get back... and you're frantic not to lose anything more. To protect and be the world's caretaker... day in, day out.

But we too lost. We too want to protect. And we can only walk beside you if you don't push us to follow behind with the way you treat us. No matter how good your intentions are... you can't protect the world, and us, by your lonesome. You'll break one day. And then, so might we.

We want you to treat us as we treat you. We're not your charges. We're your allies. Your friends... and we'll share the weight of the world. If you'll let us.

That's what we're trying to say."

Collapsed against Kigiri, Morgana listened. She had not the strength to stand, nor protest.

"I..." was all she managed before her consciousness faded once more.

"Copy," came the response to Akiko. "Sending a team your way."

Hi above, the low thrum of the giant airship had vanished.

"Oh geez..." Kirigi went down on her knees to gently put Morgana on the ground. "Aki, can you hurry this along...?"

"Mm, will do." Akiko nodded, and put her mask back on. "You three. Please guard dad and Morgie until I'm back with them. Will try to hurry."

And with those words, taking the crystal vial firmly into her hand, Akiko teleported away via Aetheryte - though she made a kind of irritated expression for a moment of brief delay... regardless, in the end she vanished.

Now that help was on the way, Rowland finally staggered and swayed as he gave up the strength to stand, falling back to sit down, looking up at the airship.

"Like that makes it any better. Suppose the group shield can't complain, I'm meant to take the blows, physical and verbal."

He laid back, sword vanishing in a puff of light as he linked his hands behind his head. "I swear every potential calamity gets worse than the last lately. But its not my job to only take things seriously if its a world ending scenario. Evil is evil, giant dragon primal, tyrannical empire, lalafell targeting serial killer. Just got to tackle it all with a smile, cause a smile is what people need to see."

His jaw hung slightly agape, brow quirked. "...Who the fuck am I talking to?"

A few quiet minutes until the distinct trundle of a cart came into earshot. A heavily armed squad, complete with a large covered cart pulled by four huge destrier chocobos. Medics were quick to jump out and attend to those there, getting the wounded and unconscious safely bandaged and into the cart alongside a number of other wounded picked up on the way.

There it set off back towards the headquarters.

## Epilogue

Far above, as the airship slowly made its way back to Garlemald, four figures sat down in varying states of disgust.

Shield took off her helmet with a snort, a cascade of curled red hair bursting forth. "Ridiculous. He never should have called us back! We had them-"

"Did we, Sertoria?" Spear took his helmet off in turn, staring at her with cold green eyes. His hair was black and slicked back, nary a hair out of place. "I was fairly certain that if any of their companions had recovered, we would have been in far more dire straits."

"I had that stupid smirking twit with the sword-"

"You don't know that you did." He stared back at her.

"I did. He was against the wall! Why do you think he was putting up all that bravado-"

"Decius. Sertoria." Hammer removed his helm now, shaking his blond head. "Enough. What's done is done."

"He gave them that crystal, Rogasen." With a snort Spear drove his weapon into the ground. "That isn't going to bite us later down the line, oh no-"

"Don't misunderstand me, Decius. I don't agree with his decision," Rogasen said softly. "And I intend to have words."

"Do you now." Sertoria tossed his head.

"I do." Rogasen fixed her with blue eyes. "You know my history. I won't allow a man's madness betray my principles again."

"I know." Decius turned to him. "And I trust his plan still. I am just...concerned."

"As am I." Blades - Lucus folded his arms, leaning against the airship wall. "We're here to stop the Empire from fracturing, not fulfill one man's dream to be a Legatus..."

"It's why we're all here." Rogasen was firm. "That's our goal-"

"Then why didn't he take it?" Sertoria stood up as well, though her attention turned quickly to her shield. A good few dents decorated it now, and the purse of her lips showed her displeasure at that. "We had three Warriors of Light there. Any one of them could have been quickly taken to Zenos like he planned. Why not take it? The four of us could have easily overpowered one, fended the rest off and got out of there."

"You say it like that encounter was easy." Lucus said ruefully. "Or painless."

"I thought we had a clear plan-"

"The plan is clear." A fifth voice rang out and the four of them jumped, quickly snapping to attention as Jalbravus himself entered. "It was unfortunate that the reinforcements arrived. Otherwise the three of them would have been quickly overcome."

"Again - Legatus - could we not simply have fallen on the defensive and taken the three fallen?" Sertoria was less quick to assert her bravado in his presence. "It would have been simple to-"

"One of you would have fallen, if not more. I will see the Empire restored and whole...but not at the cost of the lives of my most loyal."

"Lives?" Decius' eyes flashed defiantly. "If it were lives you were concerned of, then you would not have sent our own to their deaths so readily!"

Jalbravus turned to him, his expression hidden behind the ornate helmet. "Two hundred and fifty eight wounded; fifty-seven dead. I know each of their names. I regret each one."

"Then why send then? Especially with those damnable crystals..."

"Which are now destroyed, as intended."

Rogesen frowned. "...We know how to destroy those crystals however. It did not need lives-"

"But it did draw out the Warriors of Light. As intended."

The four looked disgruntled. "...It did." Decius said, eventually. "Even so. I do not -"

"The plan is continuing apace. Do not fear. The lives of those lost were not given in vain, but for the glory of the Empire. All will be made clear."

"I am not sure I agree." Decius said, quietly.

"Your opinion does not matter." Jalbravus fixed him with a glare, and the other looked away quickly. "The crystals of that fool were tainted, impure, and needed to be destroyed. We simply used them to cleanse the Eorzeans as well. If one can use rot to purify filth, why not do so? An opportunity was seen and taken."

"And I suppose our men were acceptable casualties..."

"They were." Jalbravus' voice was final. "Now we are rid of the impure crystals, we now have the identities of the Warriors of Light, and we have robbed the damnable Ascian of his most precious possession so he can no longer interfere and the addled fool will not be so stupid as to tackle a Warrior of Light. Or he will be and then he will be dead. Now. I want information on those commanders. I have no doubt we will meet on the battlefield again and I want to understand their tactics before that happens. If needs be, we will excise the problem independently. Should you have a problem - you will speak to me."

With that, Jalbravus turned and left. The four watched him go, equal in their unease.

With a faint groan a fifth entered, setting down his sword and shield and sitting down. Taking off the helmet, he eyed a deep crack that ran down one side. "Well Leargo," Lucas said, sarcastically, "you missed the dress down."

"I overheard enough." He snorted, eying that crack with a crinkled nose.

"I hear you got your arse kicked by an Ishgardian and a monk."

"Shut up." Leargo glowered sullenly. "Maybe if Jalbravus had sent the damn backup I'd not have been caught off guard."

"...Never should have allied with him," Lucas said softly. "He has already made us exiles. Now he'll see us all dead to be Zenos' new favourite pet."

"If not feed us to the mad prince himself." Decius said grimly.

"We're all fucked anyway." Sertoria slammed her shield into the ground. "Empire's good as over. May as well have fun slaughtering the Eorzeans while we can. Just save sword boy for me."