

# Main Story

# Prologue

Shortly after the fall of Garlemald, a new enemy appeared for the City of Monsters. Skeletal dragons attacked crafter dragons & others in Dravania and Coerthas who had resources, leading to an ever exploding conflict.

As it turns out, the attackers were a necromancer and her Ashkin. When they attacked a powerful ally traveling to the City of Monsters, all was revealed... and something was set in motion.

## Chapter 1: Gloom Witch's Gambit

Slamming down yet another glass(6), Morana stared at her wall.

“Fuck.”

Her voidsent cackled, his dragon-like skull manifesting on her shoulder. How much vodka had she slammed back tonight? Probably a lot. She lounged on the couch, placing a hand on her forehead, unbothered by her third eye being covered.

“Having issues? Overstepped? How does having an entire city of monsters on your arse sound, hm? You think I’m bad. Imagine blade teeth tearing you to pieces. That’s what you can expect of Eorzeans. Or issss that what you like?” As usual, her voidsent was being an arse.

Morana coughed, taking another long swig. Ashkin under her command, at half power given she wasn’t at full capacity but rather being aided by her \*parasite\*, passed by, giving her that look. Oh, she was coping right now, that much was clear.

Holden and Viv exchanged glances, wanting to speak up, but not doing so this time. Unwise. She was stressed and needed space. Ced was always lurking nearby, knowing something was up, but leaving her alone after she adamantly ‘requested it’. For now.

The Garlean said in a slurred tone, “Ah, fuck off Drystan. There is no way...hic!...they’d find me here. The ‘Garlemald Gloom Witch’ is myth, to the Eorzeans. We’ll fix the issue by...hic! Sending the damn forces to a different part of Coerthas or something.”

“Mhm...mhm. We’re almost out of food, again. That, and heating components. I may be able to survive on the thirteenth without such frivolous things. You, mortal? You need it. If you die, my connection to this damn world is broken. I need you \*alive\*,” Drystan snarled, annoyed at her reaction to all of this. She was slipping. Insanity again? Simple inebriation? Nah... it was beyond that. Was it due to isolation? Probably.

He could not ‘be there for her’ because he simply did not care about her wellbeing. He was \*trying\*, because she was his only anchor here. Void, it was hard.

“I get it,” Morana said dryly. “You magical fiends are all the same. I am a means to an end for you. Let me have my night. Areshole. I will get shite done when I am sober again. For the record, I’d like to avoid being torn to pieces and shite.”

“Shite done, as in sending more of your forces out there? How can you discern random merchants from that City you fear so deeply, hmmmmm? Mark my words, you will attack one of their allies, and then you will live to regret it,” Drystan snarled, but Morana was no longer paying attention.

She was typing on her tech, and snarled out in frustration, her fist coming down onto the keyboard. “All of the FUCKING pingbacks - they are getting closer and closer to that damn City. Did your hollow shells of the undead attack one of them on the way out? I was tracking their movements and EVERYTHING! It was so perfect!” She downed another several sips of vodka, then buried her face into her hands.

She had no words of comfort from her voidsent ‘partner’. Just a growl of disgust at this slip up yet again. How was she supposed to know that (a) these incompetent maniacs would start an entire city of MONSTERS, and (b) despite her efforts, her creations would unintentionally attack them.

She shook her head and drank up again. The disdainful Garlean scientist shoved those worries aside. Another soul-absent dragon was set on its trajectory, \*surely\* it wouldn’t run into one of those damn vampires, be them the void-based ones or Ishgardians. She’d gathered enough data to know there was \*something\* going on with those damn Elezen that she wanted \*nothing\* to do with.

The City didn't often trade between itself and Talifeather. She could have her minions strike there and sap resources, which would restore hers. The City had enough to deal with, considering that disgusting twisted scientist was after them.

Speaking of... Morana checked into her minions working there, against that odd void lab Rook had going in the Ruby Sea. Corpse collection in that area was thanks to Drystan. They could be useful for some things, she supposed. They did not have their souls - not at all. They were hollow shells, no harm done in controlling puppets. Disrespect for the dead, maybe. But she didn't care.

At the moment, she had six zombified Kojin to work with and eight zombified Namazu in Othard, searching for more clues on that \*disgusting scientist\*. A small force, but when they hit their specified target, she would enhance them as she could.

She clenched her jaw, not looking forward to when that happened.

T-those nightmares...

But...it was means to an end. Rook was targeting \*everyone\*, not just her enemies. Not even non-Garleans deserved her methodology she implemented. The ethics... Morana snarled, not liking the idea that she even remotely cared about the fate of Eorzeans or Othardians. She was Garlean. These other peoples were going to subjugate her if she didn't take \*action\* first.

They were people with fangs, claws, beastly features, and what have you. Her people were prey. Well, it was time for her to expand territory \*first\* before they could catch her and destroy her like her own kingdom did to itself.

Fools.

Did they not realize that Eorzeans and Othardians were the \*problem\*?! No doubt, to utilize their natural magic to subjugate people like her! This could have all been avoided if....if... she had no idea.

“....hic... fuck,... damn it, damn it, damn it.” She buried her head in her hands.

Drystan snarled, “Going to cry? Going to show weakness? At least finish looking at your report in Othard before yet another breakdown, you thin-skinned mortal.”

Morana muttered several curses toward her voidsent under her breath, but eventually refocused, looking at her report(16). Her unsouled zombies were causing a ruckus at that damn void lab (13), and Rook couldn't figure out the source. If she obtained one of them, they would activate self-destruct.

Why the hells did she send that one dragon through coerthas, an early prototype, without such mechanisms? Goodness, she wished she could turn back time right now. Whatever, this was more important, she'd rather the City on her arse than those fiends in their twisted labs.

"Occupying her monsters, good. I will have mechanisms to strike at her damn lab eventually, I am sure of it," Morana muttered. She had nothing close. Not yet.

The pingbacks from that failed trial with the dragon had shown her detailed video feed (19). She was up against... lava dogs. Elezen vampires....and possibly a fellow Garlean. The feed had been clear enough (8). She did not know how to handle it, but perhaps said Garlean was in trouble. She did not recognize the woman for the life of her, but the pingbacks for scanning mechanisms were clear. Maybe she was a hostage. She could need rescue?

Though that mysterious Garlean's eye, if she was one and had one, was covered.... Morana was almost certain she was like \*her\* with that tech she utilized.

Did it matter? It felt like the entirety of Garlemald was against her, too. She was a test bunny, and she came out like \*this\*. Positively twisted.

She slammed down another glass, putting her hand on her forehead again.

"One of you can cook. We have supplies. Get me something. Anything." A pause. "Please."

Dorian sighed, nodded, and dismissed himself to the kitchen. Given her firm hold on a portion of the lifestream, and her granting their souls to them, they had their will and were people. They did not rot, they were...frozen in time. Purely magical entities. Dorian, and the rest, were following her commands because they respected her and chose to stay.

But no one here knew how to cook.

That meant that she got crushed meats, veggies, and portions of stolen dairy all mashed together in a rather disgusting manner (5). She took one look at the food and groaned, but took the spoon anyway. Something was better than nothing.

As she ate (and gagged), Drys's skull formed over her shoulder again. "Slop, eh? Your minions are bloody useless. Seems the status in Othard is positive. And the status of your supplies?"

"...hic... Fuck off. They are not my 'minions'. They are my family. As for that. O-obtaining in Talifeather. Damn City has not had shipments between there. They focus on matters between themselves and Ishgard, primarily. Should not run into problems."

"You're sure..."

"Yep. And if there happens to be a problem, I have a solution."

"One that won't backfire like hell?!" the voidsent snarled.

"Mmm...probably," Morana replied, taking another swig of her vodka. If she didn't succeed in expanding territory, she'd get torn apart by monsters. Might as well try to live in the now after such a dangerous failure...

## Chapter 2: Intersection

They were wrong.

It was at this time one of Morana's zombies, Brooks, was sent on a skeletal dragon to attack an ally of the City of Monsters. Not that they knew. By the time they realized, it was too late.

And this time, they couldn't get away with just vanishing into the night, because an Ashkin was now captured.

Brooks, in particular, someone still gaining his soul. A meeting had been called in the City of Monsters itself.

A lot went down - mostly Morana being stubborn.

But the City did find out that Morana worked against their enemy, Rook, and rescued people from them. The City of Monsters chose mercy. Rather than invading their home in Garlemald, they sent supplies needed to *save* Morana from starvation.

*\*\*About a month later \*\**

Drystan's silence has been a blessing, and maybe a curse. Either way, Morana was feeling the pressure.

Ironically... The City saved her life. Their leaders arranged for an exchange at a named location, which was without incident. Brooks is still at the City and in their prison, and the dragon is still under control of Ash. The supplies the City sent her for the trade of tech were more than enough, and alarmingly, more than she asked for.

She was suspicious at first. It took a lot of convincing from Cedrick that things would be okay. The conversation went something like this:

*\*Seeing the crates stacked up in front of her home, Morana's jaw dropped. The delivery by zombie dragon had come to be more than expected. "This is more than I asked for," Morana said flatly. "They are trying to poison or slay us. I know it. Get rid of their new 'problem'. Damn it..." She clenched her fist.\**

*\*A hand fell on the woman's shoulder, who was currently shivering uncontrollably. She was practically skin and bones right now, so weak from hunger. She also was quite sick, and let out a few hacking coughs. Her condition was worsening. She would be dead in a few days without help. Cedrick wasn't going to let that happen.\**

*\*"I don't trust them either," the zombie muttered, letting out a sigh. "But the only thing we can do right now is survive. If it kills us, we will die anyway. You know that. Those of us with our full souls back will survive for a time. We will wander aimlessly. Without purpose. We will also rot again, without flesh to consume. Additionally. I do not want you to die, Morana. You are my sister now. The City is dangerous. But this is an offer we cannot refuse."\**

*\*"They will ask for something later. We will be in their debt, and they will be at our door demanding it to be paid. You heard the vampire. He can track us. They will demand -everything-," Morana said,*

*her shoulders slumping. She let out a hacking cough, falling to her knees and reaching up to hold her head. There were health potions in the mix... medicine too. She needed it... so badly.\**

*\*Cedrick said softly, "That is a bridge we will need to cross when the time comes. You need this, Morana. Please. Accept this for now, take the potions, the medicine, the food. Get your strength back. We can handle that situation later. Alright?"\**

*"...Yes," Morana said softly, unable to argue any longer. After another cough, she added, "...Alright."*

*Cedrick got the poor necromancer inside, and covered in blankets, as soon as possible, then got to work taking care of her.*

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A few days later, here Morana was, doing better. But now, they had other problems. Other monsters. That psychotic scientist who tortured monsters needlessly, and made her own light-based variant of twisted things, had not intercepted her forces lately, which was good.

But the voidsent portals opening up all over Garlemald, which resulted in a bunch of said voidsent running rampant, were indeed clashing, and getting closer to her home. The only help Drystan provided was to laugh and call her a fool. Evidently, he wasn't keen on being helpful currently. His aid was incredibly variant, after all.

Morana sat in her makeshift kitchen, staring down at some very watery soup with a very 'interesting' mix of flavours. There was a LOT of salt. This...was made by Finn. Wasn't it.

Morana couldn't cook. Nor could any of her zombies. Cedrick tried his best, but he had tastebuds only for raw flesh right now, and...yeah, that wasn't super helpful for his necromancer.

Speaking of which, the zombie sat next to her, frowning as he stared at a holographic map. He said in a low, alarmed tone, "They are closing in. We have supplies thanks to that City. But we will be forced into the defensive for a long while. There is a lot of them."

Morana muttered, "Of course there is," in a tired voice. She sounded defeated, her gaze forlorn and faraway. "Prepare the defensives, then. I will help."

"But Morana, you--"



"I said I will help," the necromancer said, turning her eerie, glowing pale gaze on Cedrick. "What have I been doing? Sitting around, a useless bag of flesh, recovering. Drystan may be absent for the most part, but his power is not. I can fight long and close range if need be with my Resonance."

"For a short period of time, and then your mind lapses into torment," Cedrick muttered, shaking his head. "You are stubborn like the rest of us. You cannot keep pushing yourself like this."

"I can, and I will," Morana said. "Look. You will not be abandoned here. Drag me back and toss me in the bed as you always do."

"You will take down our enemies. But your mental health will be impacted once again," Cedrick pointed out in a matter-of-fact tone.

"It's damaged beyond repair already," Morana growled. "May as well make myself useful in some fashion. Only thing we can and must do is survive. 'Mental health' and 'happiness' be damned. It is not possible for the likes of us. But we will carry on regardless."

Cedrick stared at his necromancer with sadness in his gaze. He wished he could do more for his little sister. He knew arguing further was futile. She was set in her ways. He sighed, giving a low growl and shaking his head, but said nothing more as he prepared further to clash, alongside her, with the ever-growing voidsent problem.

—

*\*"We feed the war machine... the sacrifice has just begun..."\**

Morana sang this to herself as she stared at the screens, her strength back, but at a high cost. Lacerations lined her body, as she'd gone out there to fight alongside her zombies, much to Cedrick's dismay. At the moment, she is inside and recovering, nearly falling asleep at her desk.

The recent attacks had been brutal, relentless, and highly unusual. She'd been tracking voidsent activity with her aether-reading magitek, and the portals opening up all over Garlemald were accounted for comfortably.

Until they weren't.

Rook was sending her voidsent now. Morana had become a problem. She knew that damned evil scientist was behind it, given the markings and lacerations on the voidsent sent over. She'd seen that on the monsters she'd...rescued, for some reason.

Regardless, things right this second were quiet. Right? She could relax for just a bit. That meant sleep. She didn't do anything other than watch these screens, usually, for hours upon hours a day. Usually she did it day in and day out. Cedrick encouraged her to actually have fun and rest a bit.

How could she? She was always in survival mode. He spoke insanity. He was trying to look out for her, she knew, but that didn't matter.

Her eyes closed, and she slumped.

[That's when the siren sounded.](#)

A blood curdling scream rang into the air. It'd been so long since she screamed, and Morana clutched at her chest, taking a deep breath. The stress had been too much lately. An entire City of Monsters wanted her \*DEAD\*. A far more powerful necromancer could track her down, and he was a monster. Rook was sending her voidsent after her, and possibly other things.

Morana reached a shaky hand up to her pulse, tears pouring down her cheeks. She quickly reached up and wiped them away. She'd heard that siren in her nightmares recently. The ones the echo brought. *\*A possible future\**. It was coming to fruition.

A voice came through her communication unit. She reached up to receive it. "...Yes?" she muttered.

"Was that you?! Morana, are you alright?!" Cedrick asked as the siren blared.

"Nevermind that. We are under attack. Status report, Cedrick," Morana said, her jaw clenched.

"Several void portals opened a mere ten yalms away. The voidsent pouring from it have those signature scars. Rook's fiends," he said. Fuck.

"I am sending the zombies out, along with a surge of my power. If that isn't enough, I will be joining them," she said.

“No,” Cedrick said firmly. “Morana. You–”

“Silence. That is an order, Cedrick. Do not argue,” she snapped, her voice bitter and cold.

“Morana Jen Glacies, you may be my superior, but the world has changed. We are in this together,” Cedrick snarled firmly. “I may be able to survive if you fall. Like hells will I let someone who is a sister to me get herself killed.”

Morana remained silent, her eye twitching. Damn zombies and their free will. They were easier to control when they were, well. Actually under her control. When they got all of their soul back from the lifestream, that was it. Sure. She could stop the process.

She never did.

Now, she ended up with someone like an obnoxious older brother who wouldn’t shut up when he needed to... Yes, sure. Okay. She asked him if he wanted to be her older brother a while back. He agreed. But right now she wanted to tear him to pieces.

There was a long pause, and Cedrick growled in a low, gravelly voice, having somewhat of a ghostly echo to it, “Well?”

“Fine.”

“Good. I will keep reporting the happenings to you, commander, as you monitor the situation from where you \*should remain.\*”

“Fine.”

Morana sighed, wanting to rip her linkpearl off and throw it against the wall. She didn’t. Her heart pounded, and she monitored the situation.

Things, unfortunately, only grew worse.

“THEY BREACHED THE HOUSE!” came the shriek through the pearl from Ivy, and that much was confirmed when her monitors blared.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Morana mumbled to herself. She grabbed her gun, ready to morph it into a scythe if melee combat became necessary. Fear seized her. She needed to get to one of the safe places she set up in the house.

The lab wasn't safe enough, sure it was a huge maze, but being cornered here would be \*terrible\*. There was only one way out, and she couldn't bear the idea of not having some sort of escape through a window or...something.

Swallowing, she weaved through the maze of metal with ease, leaping over the railing and landing, shuddering as her limbs took the impact. That would hurt later, but it was necessary. She then rushed up the stairs, not bothering to pray to any deity that she'd make it.

She knew none of the Eorzean gods would look fondly upon a Garlean like her. Her people were abandoned, hated, and doomed. Survival was all they had, and the one thing they could rely on - the Empire - was now destroyed. Well, the Empire itself was corrupt and evil, she knew that too.

So really, they...she... had nothing. Just her zombies.

She shook that thought away as she entered the safe haven she set up in this confusing house layout that she remembered instantly. Thankfully they'd not broken through the first wall yet, but she heard shrieks and growls, like hungry animals trying to scrabble through. According to the feedback from her Ashkin, they were being held off. Good.

She hoped they weren't dismembered too much. She wasn't sure if she had enough meat to feed them for the restoration effort after she reanimated them. Whatever, that would be something to tackle later, and Cedrick knew to play dead properly before he got torn up too much.

She was the most vulnerable here, really.

That thought caused her heart to pound.

But not as hard as what hit her ears next.

“WELL WELL! I saw pictures of you from the boss, but I didn't want to believe it. Morana Jen Glacies, my, it's been a while, hasn't it, sister?”

...it was Gideon. Gideon Mal Glacies, her brother.

The same brother who had watched in glee at her sentence for her betrayal of the Empire. Death had been the general opinion, but he gave them a ... different idea. Morana was brilliant, she just needed more training! She could be put through the same experiments she had been endangering. Be fed the life of the very people she tried to save.

All of that had been his idea.

She'd hoped he'd died in the civil war; he'd been sent out to fight in it, after all.

Like her, though...he was a survivor.

Fuck.

Morana swallowed, reaching up to rub her temples. She couldn't respond, not that she wanted to.

**\*SLAM!\***

There was something hitting the door, accompanied by loud hissing and growling. She'd heard those noises before from some of the vampires she'd saved. Oh *\*no.\**

**\*SLAM!\***

There was the sound of splintering, and Gideon cackled from behind it. Was he one of them? He would never let himself be 'tainted', that was impossible. No... his laughter rang out along with those noises. He had something with him.

"Oh, Morana! You know I don't want you dead. I can make an agreement with the rabbit doctor to have it all hurt less. How does that sound? You can repay your debt! You took some of our beasts. I would hope it was to do an experiment on them, but I know you likely freed them, out into the wild, to be a problem, an infestation again. You were always a bleeding heart to wounded, mindless creatures, weren't you?" he asked.

**\*SLAM!\***

More growling.

Morana reached out to her voidsent. *\*Drystan. I need your aid. Now.\**

There was a distant cackle at the back of her mind, a tickle from it. *“\*You have some of my power,\*”* he said. *“\*Use it, Gloom Witch. Otherwise, activate your Echo and pass out. I may be able to get your fleshy body out of trouble. Maybe. Though, watching your panic feeds my amusement.\*”*

He would be no help here.

*\*SLAM!\**

Tears trickled down Morana’s face, which she quickly wiped away. She would suffer horrible nightmares, but it’d be better than waking up on that table. She took a deep breath, her eyes shifting to a deep red as she activated her echo. The Resonant.

Tendrils of her power went out to the zombies in a large radius around her house, empowering them. Given her limited resources lately and how she’d been sapped of power, it would take her days to recover, and if the City decided to attack *\*then\**...she would be done for.

Dealing with them somehow seemed better right now than *\*Rook\**.

*\*SLAM!\**

The door shattered.

Morana bit her tongue to prevent herself from screaming, pressing herself against the wall of this maze-end she made. The growling and hissing sounded out louder, and whatever it was drew closer.

“What’s the matter, Morana?” her brother’s voice sounded near her location, just around the corner, amused and excited. “Are you afraid to meet my new friend here? I thought the beasts were friendly with you? You can’t reach your hand out and make amends? Why is my friend *\*any\** different?”

That’s when someone came into view, someone that caused her to let out a scream once again. Fear billowed from her in waves, causing said someone to let out a louder snarl.

“Aw, it smells your fear Morana! It’s hungry, I may let it take a bite just for you giving me a hard time. My boss and I want you back alive, so don’t worry... you will survive to feel everything,” Gideon taunted.

What Morana was looking at was a vampiric voidsent. He had dark tan skin and long, silky black hair somewhat tied back. He was an elezen with shark-like teeth and jet-black eyes, torn clothing with lacerations \*all over him\*. His arms were somewhat scaled, like that of a bird. He had wicked claws that could shred flesh so easily. He was in tattered clothing that was soaked with blood.

*\*He’s berserking. These monsters have a mechanism of berserk, I’ve seen it triggered, my zombies had a hard time getting them to calm down from it. Shit.\**

Now, Morana could see what was going on clearly. Gideon rounded the corner, and he was holding onto a pole. The pole had a thick wire loop on the end of it, something that buzzed with energy. It was forced around the vampire’s neck. She recognized that—it was a catch pole with electrical feedback to shock the victim if they misbehaved. Her brother held it with both hands, an amused smile plastered across his face.

“You don’t want to pet it? Look at how friendly it looks!” Gideon taunted, giving a low chuckle. “You rescue these things, after all. The video feedback doesn’t lie. You took them away, alive. Are you \*sure\* you have a soft spot for these things? They are hardly charming.”

He prodded the vampire closer. The vampire bucked and struggled, but clearly, his strength was sapped. Not to mention...

*\*ZAP!\**

This caused the vampire to scream out in agony, panting and refocusing on what he was forced to look at. Morana. \*Prey.\* She was cowering, and he couldn’t turn and see his captor. Not that he could hope to \*think\* clearly like this. The only thing he saw in front of him was food he desperately needed. He began to tug the pole, trying to get at her, his fangs snapping.

Aside from the initial scream, Morana was silent. She kept her eyes on the vampire, ignoring her brother. Tears fell down her cheeks.

*\*This thing is going to kill me,\* she thought to herself. \*Stop looking at him like a person. Stop looking at him like anything other than a monster.\**

But what she looked upon was a desperate person, turned ravenous against his will. She had seen that in the other vampires she rescued. Her words to them had been a lie...

A memory flashed in her mind.

*\*“Listen up,” she snapped toward the vampires. “I do not like you. I am not your friend, I do not want anything to do with you -monsters-. But no one deserves this. Regardless. I am no hero. I -only- look out for myself. Understand?”\**

That was the lie. She hadn't only looked out for herself. She'd saved them and let them free.

And now, she made a decision.

*“\*Your bleeding heart will get you killed. Don't do it. Don't-”* Drystan said in her head..

“Shut up,” she snarled aloud.

Gideon blinked in confusion. “Shut up?” he growled, his tone a touch irritated. His lip curled up into a snarl, and he took a step closer, forcing the vampire to as well.

Morana hadn't technically directed that toward her brother, but hey. It worked.

Smirking, the Gloom Witch's eyes fastened on the vampire. Suddenly, she lunged forward, *\*right in range of those fangs and claws\**. But, in doing so, she grabbed the pole and ripped it from her brother's grasp, causing him to fall forward and gasp. Gideon fell right into the range of the vampire, who lashed out with his claws and lunged, sinking his fangs into the man's arm.

Now, it was Gideon's turn to scream out. Morana smirked in satisfaction, but she had to think fast. Maybe she could restrain the vampire with her zombies, she didn't know. She grabbed the thick wire on his neck and began to tug.

...With his fangs latched onto Gideon, getting the wire off was impossible. However, what the vampire did next really didn't help.



At all.

In a flash, she was on the ground and pinned, his hand wrapped around her throat. Jet-black eyes stared her down as he leaned into her face, several drops of blood falling onto her cheek. She stared up at the voidsent with her heart pounding, her voice caught in her throat.

She couldn't even scream. The voidsent bared his fangs and let out a low, rumbling growl, but made no other move to attack her. Just stared, trying to figure out if she was an enemy or not. He couldn't *\*think\** properly, he—

Suddenly, the pole was grabbed and tugged. The vampire shrieked as an electrical shock ran through the wire, which Morana hadn't been able to get off of his neck in time. Gideon was in control again, and hurriedly dragging the vampire away. Shrieking voidsent swarmed and billowed around, the snarling of zombies growing louder.

Her forces were closing in.

"The vampire has become unruly...DAMN IT!" Gideon shrieked. "I'll lose it if I go for the witch. Abort mission... abort mission!"

Gideon's eyes locked on Morana as he struggled to get control of the vampire, who was thrashing about and snarling after the taste of near-freedom. "This isn't over."

Just like that...he was gone.

A void portal opened up and whisked him away. His forces poured into it. Morana wondered if he was pacted. Maybe he corrupted himself in that way. Who knew.

Warm liquid dripped down her neck, and she reached up to it, realizing the vampire's claws had cut into her neck and shoulder, though not too deeply. He hadn't even been trying to attack her yet, either. She shuddered at the amount of real damage he could have done in that instant if he had wanted to.

Her Ashkin tried to get to her, but she refused to leave that corner yet. "Go away," she gasped, curling up into a ball and hiding her face. The fear was overwhelming. "Go away."

“Morana, let us help,” Cedrick said. “Please. We need to treat that wound. The medicus is ready. We need to help you as soon as possible.”

“Go away,” Morana whispered. She wanted to sob, to scream at them to leave her alone, but she could only whisper that.

Eventually, they managed to drag her off. Two things locked her mind. One: Pure fear. Two: Horror. Horror that she couldn’t get that vampire freed in time from the clutches of Rook... What would he endure because of her failure?

Of course, she tried her best. But she didn’t see it that way. For that... she felt despair. So much despair.

## Chapter 3: Enter the Lady of Salvation... & the Blue Jay

Shortly following the attack on Gloomhaven Base, a mysterious new ally appeared for Gloomhaven, changing their trajectory forever. When Cass, a Blood Mage loosely allied with the City of Monsters, tested out a Sharlayan teleportation device, she was sent to random coordinates accidentally... Gloomhaven.

It’s as if fate itself brought them all together.

Because, as it happened, she was the spark to help Gloomhaven change for the better. She got to know Cedrick, Morana, and the rest of the Garleans better. Though she was fully capable of destroying them, she chose mercy and kindness.

Which worked hand in hand with the City’s mercy.

Unfortunately, good times did not last, and an attack from Rook was on the horizon, discovered in Cass’s dreams. Though they won the battle with her help, and a grisly one at that, they alerted their enemy to this new alliance.

*The Blue Jay therefore enters the fray.*

**Following the battle, and within one of Rook’s laboratories...**

At the moment, Gideon was cracking up.

But not because of what he'd see later.

No, he was reviewing the footage of the absolute carnage of the mercenaries. Experiment indeed. Rook liked this endless torment and death, it fed her obsessions and sadistic tendencies. The only pleasure she got was from nonsense like this.

Fine.

It helped the greater good. She'd be means to an end.

Gideon was laughing because he was right. "The absolute power of that monster," he growled. But it's not obsession that drives him. He didn't want to pick the monsters apart. He still didn't quite know what he wanted to do aside from gathering power as much as he could. This world would destroy him and every other Garlean otherwise.

Well.

He had somewhat of an idea of one other objective. He wanted his people to rise up and return to the Empire. To see the outside world will *\*never\** accept them. That it was all lies. From monsters like that *\*especially\**.

His sister had the right idea when the fear was driven back into her. He scowled. Why did Morana have mercy for those savages?! She couldn't understand that Resonant experiment, what she was put through, was to *\*help her\**. Those Eorzeans proved his point for him, they betrayed her, and so she suffered the consequence which really was a victory. She had *\*magic\**. She should be grateful.

She was his only family left after fellow Garleans ripped their parents apart. He witnessed it. It was grisly. But what wasn't, these days. He shook his head. She just didn't get it. First, using the magic gifted to her by the empire to *\*raise zombies\**. Really?! Fiends who were hated, and for a good reason?

She raised a whole new family for herself. How utterly *\*pathetic\**. That wasn't why he helped her. Really, she didn't deserve his help - not after throwing everything away to help those savages. As a

kid, then teen, he'd been torn between jealousy and admiration. Their parents favored his older sister.

And she wasn't there for him, simply put.

Always... immersed in her studies. She never gave him the time of day. No matter how much he asked, it was always 'later'. 'Later.' 'LATER'.

Well. She helped sometimes.

It wasn't enough.

*\*He\** deserved to be the one accepted into that internship and no one understood that. Sure, his interests were elsewhere but because Morana got all of the attention, he focused on what she did and it still wasn't good enough.

And despite all of that?!

He still loved his sister, so *\*why can't she stay on the path that will lead her to victory\**? She deserved none of his effort and yet he's going out of his way to work with this THING to get to her and everyone else that needed to see the truth. He advanced beyond her by now. *\*Despite\** her ignorance and lapping up all the attention and advancement he needed far more back then, he still cared about her.

"Surely she will see now. This will prove me right."

He watched the footage, snickering. Utter carnage. Right.

"People with power do not care for those lesser than them, we will always be lesser than them. Oh Morana, can't you see? Those immortal monsters do not *\*love\** like us. Maybe they do at first," he muttered to himself.

He cracked a scowl. "But all feeling *\*drains away\**. You are a toy to them. Your 'family' is no different - they will be that way someday too, immortal damn fiends. You don't live forever and gather all of that power by wielding *\*emotion\**. One slip... One misplaced bite. One wrong blast of magic. And you are dead. Broken. Toys. Or...they get bored. When they get bored, you are thrown

away. Killed. They are so good at playing pretend. These unnatural fiends will *\*never\** think like us,” Gideon snarled..

He shook his head. “Magic, aether, has twisted the Empire into something *\*else\**. It has twisted you, too... and has twisted *\*me\**. We can adapt to bend it to our will, or bend to its will. Oh, sister, why can’t you understand the former?! Your path before you strayed and started saving these *\*monsters\** was the most logical.”

His little experiment didn’t remind her.

Maybe being on Rook’s table for long enough would.

He wouldn’t let his ‘boss’ (so she thought) kill her. A little torture never hurt anyone, right? As long as it set her on the right path and *\*reminded her\** that the world was twisted, and she needed to take from it, or have her life taken. They would be a family again someday.

Someday, she would understand why he did this.

Rook had the right idea, to turn her little ashkin minions against her to tear into her. Not to death - Gideon didn’t want that. A reminder. Three birds with one stone. Morana would remember *\*why\** working with beings of pure magic was a horrible idea, why her use of the magic she was gifted was *\*wrong\**, and the destruction of those mongrels she called her ‘new family’.

Then, when Gideon ‘saved’ Morana from Rook, and all of her false ‘family’ and ‘friends’ were dead, they could work together as a family again.

“I don’t understand. Why. You believe...” Gideon said, his laughter fading into a snarl. “These powerful entities give even an ounce of a shite about you, dear sister. They do not. They *\*never will\**.”

No matter. Rook would figure out the best ways to kill them. Then, he would kill her for the abomination *\*she\** was. Her sadistic obsessions were getting less and less off putting the more he dealt with her. In fact, he could somewhat understand the sentiment, knowing what those *\*fiends\** could do.

He blinked. Why...are there zombies dancing there on the field?

He snickered, shaking his head. They could be amusing little mockings of life, couldn't they? Though... why were they doing that? Some sort of ritual? He reached up to scratch the side of his head, giving a low growl. He'd find out eventually.

"Reduced to doing -that- puppetry. What a way to mock the empire indeed."

## Chapter 4: Are they out there somewhere?

Others had a different perspective on Gloomhaven. Mainly because those in Gloomhaven saved them from a horrible, horrible fate. One of those people was Nimie, rescued from Rook by them...

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Nimie was trying her best.

Some days were better than others, but she really wasn't all that there still (10). Her best friend, Izura, tried to help, but it took some time to break through to her sometimes. Today was one of those days.

It'd been tough, what she'd gone through, with Rook, but she never forgot the very strange Garlean Ashkin that had saved her from the evil scientist. Were they still out there? She didn't know (2).

At the moment, she was at sea. Nimie was in her cabin, staring up at the ceiling. She was going over her starry-sky tattoos, the very ones that covered her scarring. It had taken a while to get them, and was pretty painful, but it was worth it.

A knock came on her door, and she groaned. "Nimie!" Izura said from the other side. Then, she sang, "Do you wanna eat some sailors? It doesn't have to be some sailors..."

"Go away, Izzie..." Nimie said, then blinked, realizing what she'd said. "OI! Don' turn that into the sing-along-bullshite, alright?"

"Dooooooo you wanna eat some sailors?" Izura sang again, giggling loudly. "C'mon, there's some aggressive looking ones heading our way. It could cheer you up. There's no way these ones will be friendly."

“Chewing on pirates won’t help me feel righ’ now, Izzie,” Nimie muttered. She sighed, reaching up to rub at her temples. “Am I needed righ’ now or what?”

“Not needed, I’ve got the chompers, buuuut... It may make you feel better! C’mon, it’s the idiots who’ve been trying to get us for weeks for being part of the City!” Izura said.

This pirate crew got along with many, but their rivals happened to hate monsters, and even deemed themselves hunters. They tried to intercept the City’s business any time they could. Seems they found one of Athedima’s crews. Again.

“What did Captain Fexih’ra say?” Nimie muttered. “Dead Yowler think we need anythin’ done?”

“Heeeee wants your help as always if you can, because he knows you may be cheered up by chompity chomp! I promise I’ll leave you alone after you help the crew with this!” Izura said. “Please?”

“Fine. Just so you stop your yappin’,” Nimie growled, rolling out of bed and rubbing her head. She let out a sigh and grabbed a pistol, though didn’t imagine she’d be using it. She was a bruiser, after all, who liked to get in their faces and tear them to shreds with her claws.

When she got out of her cabin and into the light of dusk, the salty wind hit her face and caused her to close her eyes for just a moment. This felt so good. So right. The open air, the sheer sense of adventure. This is where she wanted to be. This is what Rook tried to take away from her. She felt her heart clench.

“THEY BE APPROACHIN’!” Came the shout of an echo-y male voice. Nimie looked up to see a tall, looming, skinny humanoid in a captain hat. His deep blue skin was tight over what looked like bones, hunched and much too long to be natural. There was no muscle in its figure, and its feet were scaled. Glowing blue strips of flesh could be seen, especially on his ribs. There was the same colors in his eyes, and mouth. This fellow was a genuine Specter in a captain’s hat and some fancy rags!

Captain Fex, AKA Captain Dead Yowler, was a dead Keeper of the Moon Miqu’te who haunted and captained this ship. He worked for Athedima, always willing to go out and plunder treasure

with the provided crew should he keep some of the cut. It was a good deal! He'd grown fond of the monsters he'd worked with, and the allied ships, too.

Anyway, at the moment, they were being attacked by monster-hunting pirates who wanted bragging rights that they took down some terrors of the sea! Cannon fire sounded out. Nimie's developing succubus wings were still unusable, so she couldn't just fly on over. Though when she looked toward the Starboard beam, she noted the enemy ship coming closer and closer.

Would they ever learn?

KABOOM!

The ship took a few hits, and soon enough, the enemy was bold enough to come right up next to the ship. Nimie grinned, her dagger-like teeth flashing. Okay, maybe getting out a little was good. And she was a touch hungry. She let out a whistle, bunching up her muscles and taking a running start before landing on the other ship. She was immediately surrounded, but the carnage began quickly.

An enemy hyur met her jaws, and she drank greedily, tossing them aside before draining their life away entirely. She took a slice to her side, and barely dodged a bullet to her leg, but before long, she attacked an elezen, tearing into them and lapping up the gushing blood before making a mess of herself otherwise. Izura landed next to her, taking chomps out of the enemy pirates and wiping them out.

Blood splattered everywhere, staining the wood of the ship as the enemy's screams rang out, the sound of panic and aggression in the air.

Some were left alive to tell the tale, some who were persistent were left dead. Any pirate who chose to flee and surrender, well, they were left alone. Neither Nimie nor Izura were particularly aggressive when their targets fled. Izura only sang, "Best avoid us in the future if you don't want nearly-fatal wounds, then!"

Nimie snickered and yelled, "Aye, ye bilge rats were tasty, a bit salty, though!" The vampire continued to laugh, slashing people across the face and disemboweling one who came too close. The ship was turned into a ghost one, and not in the haunted way. Izura and Nimie returned to their own ship as the enemy steered away.



Nimie was bleeding rather hard, and was escorted to the healer's cabin, where she was looked at. These attacks didn't happen too often, but boy did the enemy go all out when they did.

Izura visited her friend, giving her a smile. "Help you feel better, Nim?"

Nimie chuckled and shrugged. Her eyes grew distant. "...somewhat. I'm jus' more deep in thought than anything. You think those folk are out there?"

"The hunters? Oh yeah, they'll be back, and we'll--"

"No, no. The odd Ashkin who saved me from Rook," Nimie said softly. "Landlubbing frightened fools, the lot of 'em were. Frightened of me, like I was of 'em. But... good people. I think. Think they're doin' okay?"

Izzie thought for a moment. "Mhm. Well, it's a small world Nim, maybe we'll find out someday? City of Monsters is kinda big, rumor mill has to have something on it. How about you visit it? A night out, the two of us, huh? We can ask around."

Nimie wrinkled her nose. "A night in a stuffy dance club? Eye candy's nice on the left stage, yep, but... tch. Nothin' compared to the ship. Plus... I dunno if I'll be okay to do that."

"We'll do it if you are ever okay, eh? For now, I'm here for you. Let me know if you ever do need alone time and for me to stop pestering, Nim," Izura said softly, reaching over to place a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Nimie chuckled and beamed at her. "I will," she said softly. "...Got a lot to think about, my friend. Have a nice night, ya?"

"I will. I'll be dancing on deck under the stars, guzzling rum in celebration for tonight. I'll drink your share!" The Raen chuckled. With that, Izura left to go do just that.

Nimie laid there, deep in thought. Exploring the City sometime would be good, maybe talking to Falls on the matter, too. She hadn't been around enough to hear the recent news. Maybe something had changed since her report a few months ago.

She'd need to toughen up and see.

## Chapter 5: Run Badger Run!

It was time.

Gloomhaven had agreed to become allies to the City of Monsters, and had even agreed to try and adapt. To *live*. Many had never left Garlemald, but some had.

Finn was among the Ashkin who was excited to get out there and explore. To no longer hide out at Base....

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Finn was enjoying himself, exploring the City of Monsters with much curiosity. However, he hadn't left base and its span of surrounding territory since being risen, and really didn't remember much of his past. Working with his comrades is all he's known and has been focused on. That, and battle.

The adorable jock-like Ashkin was new to all of this, and even *he* was a touch overwhelmed. Many people had approached him with questions, as he'd actually got his full soul and could answer more than Brooks, who would avoid people for the most part.

Finn was extremely social, but being part of <<Dead?>>, well.... Though he had a 'badger don't care' attitude, inwardly, a touch of fear was growing. He's been near Morana ever since he'd been risen. There was not really a chance of truly perishing. If he was torn to pieces, he could just be resurrected again by her, should the damage not be too great.

But... Morana wasn't here, and understandably. So, his relaxed smile was a touch strained after meeting many, many people he previously would have been wary of. They're all kind to him, and he probably scared them more than they scared him, but... still.

After getting crowded by excited members of the City, drinking with plenty of people and talking with excitement about his typical subjects of violence (likely offputting whoever he was hanging out with!), the Ashkin felt the compulsion to go find Ced and Cass. Or, at least, to head to 'Pixie Hollow' and hang out there in the quiet.

Except... he had no idea where Pixie Hollow was, and where did that frog go? Emmo, that was his name!

The Ashkin remained in the shadows, his eyes glowing brightly as he looked around.

His eyes fixed on a Raen woman who was staring at him like he'd grown two heads. He had that effect on people, as an Ashkin, sometimes.

Except... her eyes were excited.

Finn tilted his head, currently located in a shadowy corner of the room, used to sticking to the dark as someone who wandered the maze a lot in <<Dead?>> base.

The person staring at him happened to be Izura (Izzie, for short!) and she was excited. "No way," she whispered to herself. "That looks like one of the people she described. I gotta go find her. But is he going to stay there? Hmmm..." Finn can, of course, hear her, and he tilted his head the other way, like a bewildered puppy.

Izura reached up to her linkpearl. "Nimie? Come to the command room, quick, I think I found one of your weird friends."

Weird friends?

Finn's eyes flickered with confusion. Izura obviously had no idea how to be either subtle, or read body language (or...care) as she continued to stare at Finn with a delighted grin, showing off her shark-teeth.

*Am I in danger?* Finn wondered to himself.

Normally, he would laugh in the face of danger! But this is unfamiliar territory, Cass and Ced are in the Hollow, and the mistress wasn't here to help get him out of whatever nonsense he got himself into.

He swallowed, and if he had a heartbeat, it would be increasing.

Then, rounding the corner is a familiar face.

A vampire. One of them <<Dead?>> had rescued?!

Finn gasped, his eyes flashing in surprise. Nimie's eyes lock on him, and widen in sheer surprise as well.

That does it. Finn panicked!

The poor Ashkin darted along the wall, looking for a crowd to vanish into. Unfortunately for him, the crowds have dispersed, and so he can't hide in them (9). Alright, plan B.

"Wait!" Nimie called out. "Why're ya runnin'?!"

Finn looked over his shoulder and furrowed his brow. That vampire surely wanted revenge, or something, right? It's why they tried so hard to scare their 'guests'! And because they were scary, no doubt, the 'guests' would want revenge and be extremely angry. Finn didn't want to be yelled at right now. He can hold his own in combat, but this situation was different.

He'd be in trouble and hurt, or even permanently killed, for defending himself here. A completely irrational thought, but he at the end of the day was part of <<Dead?>> and therefore wasn't the most rational yet even if he was the most calm of the Ashkin. He'd hit his limit! And now, he was fleeing in terror.

*Oh shit, she's pissed, she's going to snap at me or something. Shit shit shit, I wasn't prepared for this! Can't let her catch me...*

He entered the long hallways of the City, darting into a public room immediately. Currently, neither Emmo nor Elias were in the Stables, and that's where he found himself. The Ashkin was now face to face with several curious chocobo. "KWEH!" they cooed, trying to push around each other to inspect him with their beaks.

Finn fell down into a sitting position, backing up into a pile of hay, widening his eyes. "I wish my guardian Liadan was here," he murmured. The chocobo swarm him, but not in a bad way! "Kweh kweh!"

"I think he went in here, the chocobo are going wild!" Izura said. "Why's he running from you, Nimie? What did you do?"

“Maybe ‘cause I chewed on their arms? Can ya blame me, given how they were actin’?”

Oh damn it, she was pissed.

Well, no, Nimie really wasn’t, but Finn sufficiently tricked himself into thinking that. Shuddering in fear, and now scowling, Finn glared toward the entrance of the stables.

*How do I get out of this? I can’t hide effectively... oh Garlemald, what do I do?*

Wait... was that... Krakka? He recalled the chocobo at base love that. Worth a shot.

As soon as the Raen following him entered, rounded the corner, and met his eyes, Izura said, “Hey! Here he is! Hey what’s wrong, dude? Don’t–”

“CATCH!” Finn said loudly, and tosses the root toward her.

“Huh?!” Izura said, bewildered and now holding a root. All the chocobos turned toward her. Izura widened her eyes. “Oh, damn–”

In the chaos, Finn made his escape! Okay... that was funny. He can’t help but give a low chuckle, though nearly slammed into Nimie! He gasped and darted around her, much to her utter confusion. She didn’t have a chance to tell him to stop and wait! He was already darting into the next room.

*Oooh, pretty! Flowers everywhere. He could hide in here, it’d be nice–.....*

...Except he’d take one look at the vampires in the room... and nope the FUCK out of there. They might have caught a glimpse of bright eyes glowing like the moon locking on them before vanishing again. He knows what they’re capable of!

Next room! Nimie was distracted with helping Izura calm down the excited chocobo, so Finn was able to pull this off.

He entered a room with a practice stage in it, almost certain he hadn’t been spotted. He took a deep breath and sank down onto the ground, now shaking. “Well! That was exciting,” Finn said, chuckling to himself and telling himself to smile again.

Little did he know, eyes now fix on him from the shadows of the room in delight... He's a flighty one. He'll have to be lured deeper into this place to ensure he cannot escape...

At the end of this tale, he gets to meet Winter, and of course, comes out just fine from the experience.

## Chapter 6: Sympathy for the Devil

SHOCKING new developments have occurred. Morana's brother....[On a path of redemption?!](#)  
But how?

Morana bore witness to a meeting, where Gideon told his story... it had been very, very intense.

Escorted into the City of Monsters, the EVA, formerly Rook's allies, would either learn they are permitted to carry on with their journey, or be executed.

All of the City & its allies, including Gloomhaven (Morana & a few of her Ashkin), gather 'round the table...

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Gideon, now permitted to speak, avoided looking at anyone else but Nin. His glowing green eyes showed no fear, even if he felt it *-to the core of his soul-*. He sees everyone in attendance - including <<Dead?>>.... who he knew wanted them all, well, dead.

Best not to focus on that.

The Commander took a deep breath, steeling himself. Then, he spoke.

"Many thanks for the welcome. I am Commander Gideon Glacies. My people are in attendance with me." He didn't do an intro for them - he wanted to get to the point. "Merely a day ago, we, Epivorase, the EVA, attacked your people, in an attempt to capture Lady J'leiska Xhula. Following a separate incident of an attack on a Serpent Captain of the Adders." He let that sink in, being entirely transparent.

"We have contributed to Rook's association the Garlean magitek she utilizes for her traps, tracking, and weaponry." Again, he let that sink in, keeping eye contact. He took another deep breath, his

heart simply *-pounding-*. "We managed to capture an auspice known as Suki, and a kitsune known as Akari, when Lei escaped."

He dove into detail regarding the battle they ultimately lost, aside from the captives. However, if they left the area, Akari would die, so he was told. At the time, Gideon himself had been knocked out. Nikolaus Oen Calvus had the wheel of the ship, so to speak.

He made the decision right then to *stop* the ship. The aetheric bond between Akari and the land there would not be severed, and she was able to survive. If they made the decision to let the Auspice die, they assumed the City would kill their current captives - two of Gideon's people.

Keeping a steady stare, he carried on with the story following the ship being stopped. "...We were out of fuel. Our journey should have ended there. We had surrendered. A quick death would have been a mercy. But..." He closed his eyes, then opened them again.

"We were shown a paw of kindness. Suki spared us. We fled to safety, and were measured by the Auspice to be salvageable as redeemable peoples. We were taught to *-hate-* everyone different from us. We took that hate and caused much pain. We were shown that, in the end, our mindsets were incorrect. By some miracle, here we are. Alive. Our previous plan had been to dethrone Rook so that I could take the mantle of Emperor. The savag—..." He winced, expecting to be torn to pieces at that mess up.

He cleared his throat, and said gently, "I apologize. We are still learning. We will be in the process of improving our manner of speaking and behavior should you deem us worthy of this chance. Anyway. The fiend was means to an end. A necessary evil. No more. We will no longer enable her disgusting practices. I plan on giving *-all-* information I have on her laboratories, on the tech she uses... and, if permitted, contact the EVA members still there so that they may work to chip away at her from the inside. They are loyal to me. I provided them the resources to survive. If I need to elaborate on how, I will." He didn't seem opposed to doing so.

He then said, "We ask for your mercy. A second chance, perhaps. If not, may we be granted a swift death."

When asked about how he knew the remainder of the EVA was loyal, Gideon had this to say: "Following the fall of Garlemald, they were desperate. They needed a leader. I captured their hearts with my Charisma. I promised shelter, food, and power." He didn't waver, not a hesitation in his

tone, as he continued (18). "I obtained these items for them at a price. Rook found me and offered all of the above in exchange for my knowledge and body." He kept a steady stare, though he felt sick to his stomach now.

"I gave that to her."

There were gasps from some among the crowd. Winter, for her part, let out a very, very low growl, though didn't lose her smile. "In doing so, I was able to provide them. Now, Rook relies on my people for, in the very least, their technology. They -despise- her like I do, and to them, she is a necessary evil." He then considers her question. "Should those among them have been planning on taking me out. They would have done so following the death of Rook. Her practices are abhorrent and only tolerated because we relied on her resources. I was...am... the link between her and my people's survival. They will continue to survive because she now relies on all we provide. The EVA was separate from her scientists, and we rarely crossed paths. I tried to minimize contact between the two groups as much as possible, warning them against saying much at all."

He furrowed his brow in thought. *What else.* Softly, he said, "There is a golden chain around my throat, and I am in shackles. But she cannot track me, and she cannot control me. That, at least, was a clause I read regarding our recent pact. If I am to die for this - I humbly request of you to spare my people and let them carry on. Or, should that not be possible. I ask I shoulder any torment they may have received in exchange for their quick death."

It was the moment of reckoning - a compulsion. A powerful blood mage, Lady Merrille, ally to the City of Monsters, was given the signal. With a wide smile, metal claws clicking against wood, and a thoughtful him, she worked her magic.

"To those gathered here, to any who support Rook or what she does - should you do so for power, money or hate..." She smiled, her lips peeling back from what now shows as a row of very sharp teeth. "...please, tear out your eyeballs and choke yourself on them."

Gideon looked toward Merrille. He saw her row of very sharp teeth and winced (9), expecting her to lunge. He swallowed, staring her down.

But... For him... nothing happens. He glanced toward other members of the council... then Merrille again. Then away.



He thought he should answer. "We do not," he said softly. "Is there anything further I-I should explain?" But he's not able to ask anything more.

Then... the screaming began. "AAAAAAAH!" All Garleans tensed but didn't move. Collapsing near the table, out in the lobby, are two among the crowd. A male Au Ra, and female viera. They were clawing into their eyes, and with a sickening squishing noise, continued to scream before *-tearing their eyes out-*. As if in a frenzy, they tried to swallow them, thrashing about with no rhyme or reason, as if they'd never had a thing to eat before.

None of the Garleans turned to see yet. Gideon asked, his tone now in a *-quiver-* (1), "...P-pardon. A-and I a-apologize," he said, his voice needing to be raised over the screaming. "D-did we do s-something wrong?"

## Chapter 7: Why are you here?

Following the meeting, Morana can't just sit quietly...

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Morana held her chin high defiantly but kept her arms crossed tightly across her chest. Her icy gaze had a gleam of hatred. She may have steeled herself up for this meeting, but that didn't make much of a difference in the grand scene of things.

She was still terrified of her brother.

She entered the meeting room, fixed her glare upon him, and twitched an eye, feeling the urge to lunge and just begin whaling on him. Resisting that, however, she took a seat in front of him and just glared. He glared back, and a cold silence settled between them.

Morana was the first to break it. "So. Here you are. You may have a few powerful people wrapped around your finger, but I know the truth. Your very soul is rotten. Mark my words, Gideon. I cannot kill you here in the City, but if I or my people catch you outside its walls, I will permit them to dine on your organs."

“Of course you will,” Gideon snapped, tensing up and clenching his jaw. “Little miss -fucking- perfect, with perfect morals, perfect intellect, a perfect path. Claiming victory for her people and her allies by slaughtering the big bad wolf. Congratulations, you will have earned that victory.”

“Are you really taking yourself seriously right now, Gideon? It is very obvious everything you are pulling is a lie. You are a heartless narcissist and you are finally caught. After everything. You have the fucking gall to sit here before me and respond that way?”

“What the hells do you want me to say, Morana? Get to my knees and grovel, apologize? Because I can do that one, I knew how to fake it very well, and I now know how to truly mean it because I’m a fucktoy of that bitch,” he said in a low, dangerous tone. “You have an entire background and sob story because of me and I could sit here whining, explaining why I did what I did, but I’m not about to do that at all. I know what I’ve done. I regret and hate myself for what I have done. It changes nothing.”

“So then why. Are. you. Here. Other than to die when all of the people whose lives you destroyed finally get their claws and teeth in you? You can’t think this City will protect you forever. The moment you step outside of these walls, you are dead.”

“Oh, you think I don’t know that?!” Gideon replied, now raising his voice. He stood up, clenching his fists, but unclenched them as Morana’s lip peeled up in an aggressive scowl. She had no sharp, pointy teeth to show, but the gesture was clear. “Look. I am no threat to you here. I have been taken down many, many pegs. But, ‘sister dear’, I know what it looks like. It looks like I somehow managed to manipulate three deities and an extremely fucking powerful vampire to be on my side and give me sympathy. So, so damn impressive, right?! I would make the perfect Emperor someday. Oh, wait one moment, that magitek airship has entirely sailed because. I. am. nothing. The forces beyond comprehension and with far more power than I spoke. Somehow, I am still here. I surrendered to the stronger and am alive. I was shown compassion where I did not deserve it. I do not know why the City is being kind to me and mine. We gave them the documentation. Perhaps they wish to verify it first and torture us if it is incorrect or there are many discrepancies, I do not -fucking- know. Perhaps Muninn for whatever reason spoke up on my behalf. Who knows.”

Morana glared at him, now standing up as well and raising her voice too. “Oh don’t play the pity card, Gideon, I know you. You can try to do your dance of words and make it seem like a miracle you were spared, but we all know the truth. It is because you had valuable information on Rook. Why, then, you are still here after you gave it, I do not know. But here you are. I do not want you to

beg or grovel before me because I know it will be fake. I do not know what I want other than for you. To. be. Slain. With you here, that is not possible but mark my words it will be the moment there is a chance without my alliance here being impacted.”

“Understood. And...?” Gideon snarled. At the look of sheer hatred only intensifying in Morana’s gaze, he snapped, “Faex [shit], Morana. I know what I did was wrong, and you have every right to kill me when I step out of these City walls. But Rook wants you and yours for experimentation and I will not let that happen.”

“Yet you wanted to drag me to her table knowing what would happen to me!” she yelled, slamming her foot onto the ground. “You put me through so much, Gideon, threatening me and my people, calling my people lesser, not truly there, abominations. A false family. Flocci non faccio [I don’t give a damn] regarding your current change of heart, I do not believe it for one second! Fututus et mori in igni! [Fuck off and die in a fire]!”

“I. know. That,” Gideon yelled back. “You think I haven’t lived with that and everything else over these past several days of everything I know being shattered?! What do you want me to say, Morana, because everything I do will go right over your head! And RIGHTFULLY. You hate me. I understand that, I am not challenging it, nor am I trying to convince you not to. Why are you here, putting yourself through even more pain by seeing me, one of your tormentors? Anything in all of the world I could say would make things worse. Fucking look at you, tears trailing down your cheeks, even the sight of me is repulsive. Are you expecting me to challenge that, to laugh at you? No. Here I am agreeing with you, but it does not matter in the end, because you will not believe me. Nor should you.”

“I don’t fucking know!” Morana shrieked. This was the loudest she’d been in a while. “Yet here I am, Gideon. I wanted answers, I am getting none of them. I do not know why you continue to insist you have changed when you have not! I know the truth! Those who spared you saw something I did not. Something I refuse to believe now. I am trying to figure out what the hells that is.”

Gasping, she suddenly fell to her knees, clutching her head. Gideon instinctively lunged down and placed a hand on her shoulder (4), asking, “What is wrong. Morana, are you alright?” A stupid question because of course not, but he’s not thinking straight.

“Don’t touch me, caput stercori [you shit],” Morana snarled, effortlessly shoving him away. The formidable voidsent in full view, Phera, crept forward and toward Morana, suddenly reaching out and ensnaring something that was attempting to make itself a problem. Drystan was dragged out of Morana, still linked to her, but screaming and cursing all the while. He was then silenced by the other.

Phera nodded, not wanting to interject for too long. This is their battle, something for them to work out. Should she be prompted, she will weigh in. But, for now, her purpose is to ensnare this fiend and let them continue. She can sense Morana is about 94% functional, for now, though her voidsent is removed. That would trickle down if he was kept like this for too long. But, it was a satisfying number for now. The necromancer just looked a little bit more tired.

Tears streaming down her face, Morana cleared her throat and stood up. “Thank you...” she murmured to Phera. Then, her eyes fixed back on Gideon. Softly, she said, “The experiment you condemned me to. Why.”

Flatly, Gideon said, “Magic is power. I wanted to grant you strength. I did not want to see you die. Turns out there are a lot of things far worse than death, and you went through one of them.” He collapsed back into his chair, putting his glasses aside for now and closing his eyes, exhaling sharply. “For what it is worth - which I know is very little if anything at all - I am sorry. None of my words or even actions could ever mend what you went through because of me. This applies to everyone else. I am a selfish, narcissistic asshole, I understand that. Lower than filth. A groveling puppet to a psychopath.”

Morana remained silent, clenching her jaw. “Nothing ever could be mended. No. I find myself wholly disturbed by your decision to sell your soul to Rook. By the way.”

Gideon snorted. “Well, my manwhoring is none of your fucking business,” he snapped bitterly. “It protected my people and will continue to. Perhaps you, now. Who the hell knows. Rook will eventually get me again. I will use that to my advantage. Least I can do. She is obsessive and wants me back. I can use my skills in the very least to aid those I have tormented. Perhaps that will convince you to not kill me right away. Can’t be a truly good person dead. But, do me a favor. Grant your promise to kill me when you see me outside of this place should you find me in Rook’s clutches, because I would rather be dead, embrace oblivion, than continue to go through that. Put down a pathetic weak waste of space. I may not deserve such a kindness. I am a selfish bastard, after

all. But in the end, it would be for the better, as I would be incapable of hurting you anymore while being granted respite from her use of me.”

Morana stood up, returning to her seat and thinking this over. “...” She was grasping what he just said, and finally murmured in a tired tone, “Why are you trying to gain my pity.”

Gideon let out a bitter laugh. “You really think I am trying to do that?” He fixed his emerald stare on his sister. “I assume you think I deserve it. You would be right. I wanted you, the last of my family, to prosper. I wanted my people to, as well. At the expense of your mental health. And at the expense of so many innocent lives. I realize that now. I am a spectator in this whole damn thing now. Awoken, screaming into the FUCKING void...” He stood up again, staring off into the distance, not particularly at Morana. Then, suddenly, he grabbed his glasses and hurled them at the wall, causing them to crack but not shatter (10).

Morana flinched, but Gideon just ignored that and continued. “With all of the knowledge of how abhorrent I am, with all of the desire to actually fix that as I was shown kindness and given a chance I do not deserve, and yet, with no future. I understand I am not meant to ever be happy. Why am I here, Morana? I am here because I have much to reconcile for before either I am slain by you, your allies, or my own fucking bullet. Do you get it now? Are those the answers you were looking for?! Because if you expect me to turn around, laugh, point, and say this is all part of a greater plan, or that I regret nothing, sorry to disappoint.”

Morana winced, murmuring, “...You deserve a lot. You do not deserve what that fiend did to you.”

“Did. Will be doing. It is all the same,” Gideon growled.

“Why are you so confident you will end up in her clutches again?”

“Because. She gets what she wants. She wants me. Something will happen to trigger it, and I will be in her chains,” he said, sounding tired. “I have no future, Morana. None. You do, now. Don’t sit here and obsess over someone who is under heavy watch and no threat to you in here. Go live. Do something with your life. Mine is over. Yours is just starting. I am happy for you in that regard.” His tone broke, and he turned away. “Anything else.”

Morana paused. She swallowed, and muttered, “I will be talking with the people who spared you at that meeting. I will get more answers then.”

“Good. So why bother coming in here to talk with me.”

“...I don’t know,” Morana muttered, resigned. “...To make you understand.”

“Well, you did. I know. I know what I did was wrong and there is nothing that can fix that. Just... go be happy, Morana. Please. I may as well not be your brother anymore after what I have done.” Tears began to stream down his face that he quickly wiped away. “But you should not have to look over your shoulder for the big, raggedy coyote coming to tear his sister to pieces. That is no longer an issue. I have surrendered my mind, body, and soul, to several different forces. Go live.”

Morana’s stare lingered on him, and she closed her eyes. Now, tears flow freely. “...I’ll try,” is all she said to Gideon, not knowing how to feel after this meeting. She needs to end it. To Phera, she said, “Thank you.”

Muninn, an onlooker in the shadows, made a note to speak with her later - very, very gently. All of her feelings were valid. But perhaps some of her fears could be put to rest regarding Gideon should she hear his story. He did not know, but he’s moved by everything. He didn’t offer Gideon comfort right now, however. The man did, truly, hurt that woman beyond the scope of forgiveness, for now. To interject and challenge that would be wrong.

Morana slinked off to calm down in a spare room offered to her, needing some time alone - and, notably, away from Drystan. A temporary blessing she didn’t know she needed. For the next hour, she spent her time sobbing, until she collapsed on the couch in the room and curled up into an uneasy rest.

As for Gideon, he just remained sitting there, staring at the ground. Looking at his hands, and clenching his fists, he muttered to himself. “What am I now. What... am I now. What am I now?” Over and over, until that faded, and he buried his face into his hands, also breaking down into sobs.

## Chapter 8: A Glimmer of Wisdom

A few hours following that very tense meeting with Gideon, Morana’s eyes snapped open, focusing on something odd in the corner. Glittering gold..? What could that be? Someone was here in the guest room she’d been offered, and she wasn’t too keen on that. Especially with none of her Ashkin around.

She felt...vulnerable.

She relied on her people. After all, she gave them all of her power. She was a necromancer, her Ashkin were the bulwarks. Now... she was helpless. With that realization, her heartbeat suddenly increased, and she sat up, fixing her glare on the small quadruped in the corner.

With a snarl, she said, "Go away."

Emerging from the shadows fully was a carbuncle-like cat with golden wings and deep red eyes. It tilted its head, then in a deep voice, said, "I mean you no harm. I just wanted to talk. As someone who respects you, child."

His voice was so familiar (10) but she couldn't figure out why. She heard it recently, but through the stress of...everything. It was hard to discern.

Wait. The meeting! That voice, it had belonged to someone notable, she heard it through the footage provided by Finn... But... why was he notable?

Going the direct route, Morana growled, "Who are you."

"Muninn," the creature said. He took a seat, tilting his head and wiggling his ears. "In a different form. My true form is very likely to... hmmm. Frighten you. After all, I came very, very close to trying your rich-scented blood." His tone was so casual and...matter of fact.

Morana tensed, widening her eyes. "...Show yourself," she growled. She had a good idea as to who this was now. With a sigh, the carbuncle shimmered, and in a dazzle of golden sparkles, spread his wings and took on his true form.

Muninn stood there looking particularly bored, or trying to. His attempt to come across as harmless. It wasn't working, but A for effort. Morana kept her glare and silence for a while. He stretched his wings, yawned, and focused upon her. "I will not come any closer, poor frightened mortal. Hm, what is it they say? Ah, yes. 'Be not afraid', I believe? Hm. Why, I know of a very good song with that phrase."

"...Why are you here," Morana growled.

“Not the most social, are you?” Muninn said, grinning for a moment. As her glare grew more withering, he snickered, but his mirth faded seconds after. “Child,” he said in a serious tone. “I mean you no harm. No. I wanted to thank you for trying to free me from your brother’s clutches when we had that oh-so-friendly visit to your base. It was a noble attempt. I am very sorry for scratching you. I do not predict it will happen again.”

In barely a whisper, Morana replied, “...You’re welcome. Is that all?” At this point, she was practically dizzy with fear. Muninn, however, had held back from tearing her to pieces or even biting her back when he’d fully had the opportunity to. He was clearly starving and out of it, yet had restraint to the highest degree then. How powerful was he?!

Though, there she was, alive. If this voidsent wanted to end her, he would have done so during that incident. Instead, well. She was still trying to wrap her mind around what happened.

After the long pause, Muninn chuckled. “No,” he said. “It is not all. May I come closer?”

“No.”

“Hm, alright. Manners are not quite in the wheelhouse of a raven, but I am learning,” he mused. Then, he said, “I was not originally part of this City. In fact, I am unsure my status as of now with regard to it.” How to put this... eh. Best to go with blunt. “I have remained Gideon’s voidsent partner despite, well, the termination of our contract.”

“...What?! Why?!” Morana gasped. It made no sense to her, not after what Rook and Gideon put him through!

“In his thirst for power, he had, unintentionally, perhaps, taken me on as his minion and rescued me from Rook. His maltreatment was evident at first, until it slowly faded, and he treated me with far more respect than I ever gave or would give him. He is, indeed, quite the prideful little thing. After what he has done, he deserves my malice and my torment. Yet, all I offer him now is guidance and my fair share of simply being an asshole.”

“That’s it then?! He was nice to you once, for his own gain, and you decide it’s time for sunshine, rainbows, and dancing?!” Morana snapped, feeling bile and anger rise into her throat. Tired of



everything, tired of being frightened, tired of thinking she's going to be ended and tormented, she gained the courage to shakily stand up and march right on over to Muninn.

Something she immediately regretted, because she clenched her jaw, then her fists, then slowly took several steps back, breaking eye contact and shuddering. This entire time, Muninn remained relaxed and even a bit jaded to the situation.

Unamused, but with a hint of understanding.

"There is more to the story, child," Muninn said, keeping his voice gentle. "That was merely the beginning. Would you like answers? Or would you like for me to leave you alone? Reading context clues was never my strong suit, no. I tend to push and prod until I go too far, then feel a dash of regret and sadness in my soul. Then, alas, I have to apologize, make things right. How can I call myself a 'good' raven otherwise, hm? I do not like leaving people wary of me, not when they are not on my mental...how to put it... ah! Shitlist." He gave a low chuckle.

"...Continue," Morana muttered, resigned.

Muninn grinned. "Excellent. A thirst for knowledge is rich in you, which is always an exceptional thing. Now then. You know of the beginning. Let's pick through all that happened..."

Muninn recounted the story, in mostly vague terms, to Morana, up until the contract-break was to occur. "Gideon had one last thing. Me. I provided him power. By allowing me to fly off, well. He would be as good as dead. I saw it in his eyes, when I demanded he release me. He fully believed I was going to fly off, leave him vulnerable. He thought he was going to suffer a rather painful death at my release. Yet - if he truly wished to be on a path of change. He needed to take that risk and do the right thing. The altruism right in front of him. There was no benefit to him, only, in his eyes, a negative and painful outcome. Contracted against my will, however, well... he knows very well how that feels."

Morana winced, placing her hand over her heart. "....So... he... he released you?"

"He did," Muninn said. "It was at that point I decided to stay. I was moved by his decision, and by Suki's mercy. My, the spymaster had every right to destroy them as well, yet he, too, showed mercy. Then, during the meeting, yet another chance to die. I am no expert on the Lady's magic. But what I saw with those people... the utter, miraculous change. Making decisions that could have doomed

them, yet were simply the right thing to do. I do love a good story, and their journey intrigues me. My charge, of course, amuses me.” Muninn frowned right then. “...And worries me, but for reasons irrelevant to our prior contract, of course.”

“...Why are you telling me this? Should I forgive him?”

“That is for you to decide,” Muninn said, shaking his head. “I am merely giving you a different perspective, right from a source who has every reason to utterly despise Gideon and seek his demise. You, child, have every right to hold onto that hatred and never forgive him. That meeting was...unique. You seemed troubled and unsure. So. Perhaps giving you more information will aid with your predicament.”

“... I don’t know.”

“You do not, and that is just fine,” Muninn said gently. “Now. I do not wish to stress you further. I will leave you to your thoughts.”

“Why didn’t you bite me?”

“Oh? Would you rather I had? Or... that I would in the future?” Muninn asked, licking his fangs. Morana tensed and narrowed her eyes. Oops! Muninn felt a twinge of guilt, but waited for her response.

“No,” Morana growled. “Or at least, not that I am aware as of now. That is irrelevant. I want to know what happened at base.”

“Yes, yes,” Muninn snickered. “The big bad starved voidsent spared the frightened necromancer. A tale as old as time, hm? Now. It was because though your scent was delicious, you did not want me to. It was difficult. But I am not a monster in a negative sense, dear necromancer, only a positive one. A very good raven, cawwww... I was lost...confused... exhausted. Yet, I was not about to let my instincts win.” With that, he waved his wing. “Now then, I am off to, well. Do as I do best.”

Whatever that was.

He slipped into a void portal with no more words to the necromancer.

Her mind reeling, Morana sighed, returned to the bed, and laid down again.

It should be so simple. The hatred for Gideon unwavering. No forgiveness, not ever. He was a selfish, evil bastard. Yet several accounts were starting to contradict that viewpoint.

“How the fuck am I supposed to feel, and what the fuck am I supposed to do,” Morana sighed in a bitter, exhausted tone before slipping off to sleep once more.

## Chapter 9: Should we forgive?

A different perspective on Morana and Gideon’s meeting... Finn’s, in particular. Prior to said meeting, he checked in with the necromancer.

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“You sure you’re alright to go talk with him?” Finn asked, staring Morana down with concern. He’d followed her out of the room, having finished up breakfast and fixating on trying to help her. Like a loyal hound, always concerned, even if he could sometimes be... well, Finn.

A long pause, and Morana grumbled, “No. But I have to be.”

Finn nodded. Softly, he asked, “Want me to join you? I could explain to him how well I could—”

“Probably not a good idea, Finny,” Morana murmured, turning to chuckle at him. She took in a deep breath and leaned in to give him a hug, holding him tightly for a moment. He returned it, his concerns intensifying. She could show affection, sure, but typically did so openly only when very, very nervous. Wanting him to be reassured, Morana said, “You can remain near the place, how’s that. If something happens, you can come in and help.” She didn’t know what that would entail exactly, and was confident that wouldn’t come up. It would give Finn peace of mind, though.

Returning the hug, Finn repeated, “Not a good idea,” sheepishly, but then grew serious.

“Understood. Remain near the room. I will do that, Morana. Even if I hope things do not erupt into violence for the sake of your sanity.”

“You hope things don’t erupt into violence.... Right. Sure you don’t.”

Finn gave her an awkward smile as the hug ended. "I don't," he tried, and at the eyebrow raise from the necromancer, he chuckled. "Specifically for your sake, otherwise, yes, I would love to be involved in violence."

"There's the real answer," Morana said softly, smirking at him. Her smirk faded, and she hugged herself for a moment, closing her eyes. "....I'm frightened, Finny."

"You want me to get Ced?"

"No. He and Cass are there with one another. But... all of you comfort me, we're a family. We're comrades. We're close friends. You being here means a lot. I hope you all know I don't derive comfort from Ced alone."

"Oh, we do, mistress. But the feeling is mutual," he said softly. "And not just because you give us aether and flesh to chomp on."

"...You word things in a very interesting fashion even when not trying to," Morana mumbled.

Finn gave her a dazzling smile. "That was very tame," he assured her. "I will stay here."

With that, well... he stayed there. When Morana rushed off to a guest room she was directed to, he had the mental struggle of going to see if she was alright. But gentle reassurance from Phera told him it was best she was left alone to recover from such heavy things. He knew it wasn't that she didn't want to see him or any of the other Ashkin, but that, well. Being alone sometimes was very much needed. Thanking Phera profusely (and inquiring very descriptively if she could dismember the voidsent she was restraining, feeling sad when told that wasn't quite possible just yet), he headed out to his wanderings.

"...This is all so..." he murmured to himself, unsure of how to feel. Finn knew Morana (17). He'd caught onto her quirks - as many of their people have. She could snap one thing and mean another. Her tone indicated that she wanted so badly to hate Gideon forever, but was slowly cracking. She had expected the opposite of what happened. She'd expected to face someone who confirmed all of her beliefs, and was met with the opposite.

What does one do in that situation? Faced with someone so horrible and twisted, but hearing an entirely different person, one you cannot help but feel is telling the truth?

Finn made his way down the halls of the City, eventually coming upon Callista's room (12), a location he learned about by observation. Pacing, he eventually... knocked.

Most (normal) people would head out after the lack of response for about fifteen seconds - but Finn could hear her heartbeat intensifying and scent her fear. She was off put by visitors, people wanting to talk with her.

Hm.

Maybe this was a bad id-

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps grabbed his attention, and he blinked, refocusing. The door creaked open, and pale purple eyes fixed upon him before immediately glancing away. A light intake of breath indicated her fear. "Finn?" she muttered softly. "...You're not here to... ... hurt me, are you?"

"What? No," Finn said. "Though I could tear you to pieces really easily, and really... really wanted to in the past, you are no longer on the menu, unfortunately."

"... Un... for..."

"Yes," Finn said in a dead serious tone, clearly not catching on that he is just not helping. "Your flesh looks tasty and you were an enemy. The former still applies, the latter does not, which allows you to be disqualified from becoming a meal. You, Ares, Sparrow, and I had a movie night, and we were birds. Did something happen between now and then to make you question my motives?" he asked with genuine worry.

Callista stared at the ground, her fear intensifying. "...No, just my own thoughts." Callista was torn between admitting Finn absolutely terrified her and realizing that this was just him being him(10). After a shudder, she took in a deep breath. "We're.. Friends... I ... I think. Er, why...are you here, then?"

"You have my word, Callista, I will not bite you without permission," Finn said gently. "No touching the frightened..." He studied her for a moment, then smiled lightly. "Magpie. I will be a good butcher bird, I promise."

Callista couldn't help but smile at that, recalling the memories and how, well. Happy-go-lucky and gentle the very intimidating Ashkin could be. "Okay," she muttered.

Finn's gentle smile soon faded, however, and he sighed. "...I wanted to talk about what I overheard. I do not know if I should, but... it is something you should know, too. And I am unsure how to feel. You know my mistress's brother more than I. So..."

"Oh... you can come in, and we can talk." Callista led him in, took a seat, and continued to not really look at him, shy despite their friendship and entirely off given all of the circumstances stressing her out endlessly. Finn did not seem to mind at all, and in fact, delved into what he overheard.

By the time he finished, Callista was wearing a deep frown. She stared at her hands before saying, "I've not mentally been all that there, Finn... I'm sorry. My past comrades have really left an impact. I'm ... not doing well at all. (12)." From there, she proceeded to bury her face into her hands and begin to sob (19), not having the mental strength to hold it from Finn, but babbling, "They've changed but I am still so... so... I ... I..."

Finn widened his eyes, the instinct to comfort overwhelming. The shy woman was no doubt on edge, though. Softly, he asked, "Hey, need a hug?"

"A shirtless Ashkin who wanted to rip me to shreds at one point and could very well do so now would like to offer a hug," Callista squeaked. "...sure. What could go wrong." There was a hint of melancholy humour in her tone which caused Finn to chuckle. He got up and took her into his arms, giving her a very gentle, friendly hug.

Callista returned his hug, relaxing just slightly and continuing her sobs. Eventually, she calmed down after several deep breaths. "I... I want to be okay again. I want to be their friends, again. I want to check up on them more, Gideon too, I... I ... but right now it is so hard. It sounds like Commander Gideon has truly changed but is just... aimless. I want him to be okay, to show him forgiveness. Irene, Krista, and Nico, too. Mintha always...stuck to the shadows, but those three... frightened..me... erm. But. I want... I don't know."

"You're shattered," Finn said softly. "And that is okay. You do not need to forgive them now or ever."

“But... that is the thing. I want to. A-and... maybe Morana does too. But does...does that make us bad people, Finn?”

“No. Why would it?”

“We were hurt so badly by them... and...a-and... but...”

“You are in control of what you do, Callista. Hey. Look at me.” He leaned back as the hug ended and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. Callista flinched and glanced at, then away from him. Finn smiled. “Close enough,” he said gently. “This is coming from your new friend who previously would want to rip that bastard to shreds, alright? It isn’t wrong to change your mind. To forgive. But no one should force it. That is your decision, it is Morana’s decision. And if neither of you do, that is okay, too. They have their own demons and have dug their own graves. For some. It is too late. For some. It is not. Anyone who demands you forgive them or decides you are a terrible person for forgiving them, if you do, is unreasonable.”

“Okay,” Callista whispered. “...What do we do, Finn?”

“I do not know. How are you feeling?”

“Not okay. I needed to know this but... not okay. I want Gideon to be okay, though. I don’t want him to hurt himself, I just – right now, I’m ... I’m not able t-to...”

“Which is okay. Morana cannot, either. Do...whatever it is you wish to do. I came here wondering if you thought it was all true. It seems like that is the case.”

“I saw them change, it... it was... so surreal. A miracle. It was all true, yes, what you heard. His change of heart. He’s... so lost. And I cannot help him right now. I can barely help myself.”

“Are you frightened here in the City?”

“I am,” Callista admitted. “In Garlemald, I took it day by day. Focusing on my targets, successfully destroying a few. But a woman of the shadows on the streets, not all...there. Then it... it fell.... A-and I had to rely on the EVA... for quite some time. I ... stopped being brave. I do not know if I even was in the first place.”

“You carried on, which is still brave,” Finn said softly. Callista sniffled, just closing her eyes. “Need me to leave?”

“...No. You can stay.(15) I... would like to spend time with you, Ares, and Sparrow again, if ... if they are... okay with it. I just... just wish I could grasp how to handle everything. I thought I was, but it all went down again. The more I thought about it, the more frightened I became.”

Finn nodded. He looked around, then spotted a TV. “I have about 15 hours before I head out to a different place for important matters. I think... in that time... we can do another movie or two. What do you think? Are you okay with Ares and Sparrow coming here? I see you have a small setup.”

“Y-yes... Ares helped with that, Sparrow too... erm... but, yes, I am okay with them coming here. Can...”

“I can go fetch them,” Finn said cheerfully. “Here, you stay in your hidey-hole, and I will call upon our very excitable friends. Oh, and do not feel insecure about being so quiet, I know you’re thinking that. I am a mind reader, after all.”

Callista widened her eyes. “You—”

Finn laughed, taking Callista into a hug again briefly and ruffling (messing up) her hair. “Nope, Ashkin cannot do that, but I made you admit it right there. A point for Finn!” He cheered, causing Callista to smile lightly and roll her eyes. Finn said, “Stay here, I will fetch the birds like a loyal badger.”

With that, he set off to spark another movie night, this time in ‘Callista’s den’!

## Chapter 10: Struck

Wanting to go out more and experience the world, after being encouraged by her found family, Morana finds herself visiting the City of Monsters again. She’s been introduced to Ares by Finn, who spooks her intentionally because she wants to eventually be less afraid. Following this, she meets a newcomer to the City, who offers to show her a greenhouse. At the lot, however, they run into the botanist Irimi’s friend, Genji, who has a horrible history with Garleans...



“.....” Genji looked between the two of them. His gaze lowered slightly as she backed away from him. “You’re right. I don’t know her...but.... They didn’t know me either...not when they burned my village to the roots.... Not when they killed my family when I was just a boy.... Not when they killed my wife....nor when they killed my child...” Genji’s voice grew rough. Ice formed at his feet as he suddenly leapt into the air, aiming his blade above his head. “I know what you are...what you can do...and I’ll meet it 10 fold...!” Genji yelled as he descended towards Morana. Death in his eyes.

Irimi could see him shifting, his gaze, his form. ‘Fuck.’ She thought. His words etched their way into her horns with the hatred that was behind them. She... should have never brought Morana here. Irimi didn’t have her cane- she didn’t think she was going to need it, and not against someone she cares for none the less. Irimi would immediately back up, shoving her back into Morana to make her fall off of her feet- but out of the way.

Irimi’s hand would go to her pocket to a small suede pouch that was in there. Inside would be powdered mandrake root. It would not kill but it was a hell of an irritant. Irimi grabbed the powder as quickly as she could as she was falling, the dust flying into the air. As Irimi would fall back she would inhale a tiny amount, enough to where she was fighting off tears, but not enough to where she couldn’t move.(11)

Morana, completely and utterly useless in this situation, lets out a whimper and cowers. The ‘tough-gal’ illusion she tries to play is shattered, and instead, she is totally unmasked. Her glowing, icy-blue eyes are wide, and her heart is pounding. She is totally vulnerable, and this will likely set her back very far, if she survives this.

She is shoved into and thrown off balance, now on the ground and with tears streaming down her face, staring at Genji. She’s not been killed by the blade, but it definitely caught her shoulder as she was falling. It’s a pretty deep wound, and she’s now bleeding, in addition to whatever magical effect the strike may have on her.

Fight him off, fight him off, FIGHT HIM OFF! she tells herself. It’s not directed toward Genji. It’s directed toward her voidsent. Her inner battle is won for the moment (18), not that it’ll make much of a difference. Perhaps it will mean life or death for her, though.

What can she say?

For the first time in her life, she has to beg(20). She puts her pride aside, surrendering entirely. "Please spare me. Please. Please, I don't know what is going on, I j-just... I... I'm sorry, I...I... please..." She covers her face, frozen in place, her stomach clenched. She brings her knees to her chest and waits for the pain of the blade, shuddering like a leaf.

## Chapter 11: Removing the Parasite

Given Morana begged for her life, she has been spared. The blow is so intense that following her begging, Morana passes out, unintentionally giving Drystan control. Y'sila & Elias enter scene, bringing Morana to the infirmary.

Drystan emerges from Morana like some sort of possessing parasite and harasses staff. Genji feels awful and comes to the City - his blade being extremely effective against voidsent & people like Morana, he had struck a blow to Drystan, who's trying to remain latched to Morana even while wounded. In the end, Genji is convinced to strike the voidsent down.

Something interesting is happening in the infirmary. Morana is there, but her sleep is no longer peaceful. It's a scene practically out of a horror movie. Her eyes are open... but it's not her.

"If I die. I take her life with me," she says, her voice not her own, but a scratchy, demonic low voice that'd no doubt be grating. "My satisfaction right before my obliteration would be undeniable."

Y'sila says in a calm tone, "You can prosper. You simply need to return to the thirteenth and break the pact. Or, you die. Here. Your sorry soul will choose to save itself, it is only a matter of time. Leave."

Flora speaks up. "But, ma'am! Morana's soul may shatter! We... don't very much know what exactly will happen, but... we believe it would shatter her mind further, if not outright kill her."

"We can stabilize her aether without a voidsent for a very short timeframe. In that time, we can figure it out. But this is the only way to get rid of that thing," Y'sila replies. She turns to glance toward Irimi. "Emergency situation, we may need aether if you are willing to channel some," she says to her softly, knowing the woman wanted more experience here and assuming she's alright after that incident. Though, seeing the flowers in her arms, she says, "And with any luck, you'll be able to give those to her very soon."

Finn, meanwhile, is glaring at Morana as if he wants to kill her, his fangs bared. Though the true subject of his scary expression is revealed as he says in a low, musical, but dangerous tone: "You will leave, and pray to your damn gods I do not find you again. Ever. Get. out. of. my. necromancer. NOW."

Following this, a discussion to strike Drystan down while he's vulnerable comes up...

Finn frowns a bit, feeling antsy. He murmurs in a soft tone, "...We trusted an outsider before, and look where we are. We have a chance for a life. Cass..." He stares at Flora now. "Her parents, too. Now we may need to do that again. Like ... the rescues we took in trusted us, right? I don't want Morana to die. I firmly believe we should. Otherwise, we know the end result."

Flora swallows, then nods. "...I agree with Finn." She looks toward Y'sila, her eyes glowing with fear. "...I ... hope you know what you are doing."

Y'sila clenches her jaw. "..... One of the infirmary staff will channel aether in my place for a moment." She stares at Irimi. "We'll discuss this out therewith him bearing in mind Ashkin have greatly enhanced hearing." She literally was almost in a battle with the Archon. Now... this. Damn it, this situation is too dangerous. She needs to at least be part of the conversation before that decision is made. "Finn and Flora will remain loyal hounds so to speak and behave in their respective corners. Correct?"

Finn gives a radiant smile. Something almost... too eerie. "Sure, boss." There's a hidden 'unless Morana dies here' in there, in which case their last act would be to attack everyone involved in their sight. Sure - he agrees this is a good idea. But he's also aware it's not all sunshine and rainbows. Infirmary staff inform the Ashkin they need to leave...

The infirmary staff, a voidsent (of course), would be channeling aether into Morana right now, concentrating. They are holding up well! (13) It seems the Ashkin would be 'tainted' with the same aether... so convincing them will be the most difficult thing. Soon enough, Ares darts past where Genji would be and into the room as well, silent. He's actually incredibly advanced with stealth, and would be hard to detect. He's there, however, and appears leaning on the wall, watching everything unfold with a serious expression on his face - but he keeps his silence, waiting to see what he needs to do to help.

Y'sila fluffs out her tail. Neither Finn nor Flora seem to be happy with what they just heard. Finn says stubbornly, "We stay."

Y'sila shakes her head. "You can't. Morana won't have enough aether to revive you."

Flora, somewhat more rational, also appears very hesitant. "... I don't know about this," she finally says. The protective Garleans would definitely not appear to be comfortable with this situation at all

Genji walked into the room quietly, taking note of all who entered...and all who would not leave. He sighed. "Is it so important that you stay in this room that you die..? It makes no sense why you can find no comfort in merely standing out of the threshold of this room...it seems pointless to throw away the lives that she has supposedly given you...but that is your waste to make, not mine..." Genji's words were cold as ice. He needed to get them out so he could begin immediately.

"Supposedly?!" Finn murmurs, narrowing his gaze. Anger flickers within them, but he calms down immediately, or at least, would appear to on the surface. He says, "Someone I just met, though a kind woman, shows up with a stranger following Morana being attacked by....someone. The culprit is still out there." He shrugs. "But, either way, we protect our family. We do not know that we can trust you, or this situation at all. I feel very uncomfortable with this." His tone is soft, and not threatening. Yet. He's looking between Genji and Irimi, definitely lost about this.

Flora nods in agreement with Finn. "He put my thoughts into words."

Y'sila says, "...You're going to have to trust your new allies, you two. I know it is difficult. But if we wanted you dead, you would be by now. And you know that." She hates having to invoke that visceral fear in them. In the end, they are totally vulnerable in these walls. This will possibly hurt the positive outlook the two have on this city right now.

Finn isn't put at ease with that. It sounded like a threat (7). He tenses, now exchanging a glance with Flora. Now, he looks around. No escape. They're getting a similar look to Morana's when she realized she may soon be slain.

Y'sila curses. "Damn it. Ares, drag him out. I'll take care of Flora. You two - Irimi, Genji - stay out of the way for now, this will only take a moment."

Her hand glows, and she would lunge for Flora, who gasps and doesn't have a chance to bite the Miquo'te (at first). Y'sila is used to struggling monsters and enhances her strength with her aether, while at the same time, channeling light aether to slam into the Ashkin with precision. It'd hurt, but not kill her. Her arms are wrapped around the now struggling Ashkin who is currently thrashing about and growling like some restrained animal. But, well... Y'sila manages it! This... will need to be mended BIGTIME later. Regardless of the first interrupt, Y'sila ends up with some deep bites in the end from those metal fangs.

Finn is also too easy to take down - by Ares. The Xaela appears behind him before he can lunge toward Y'sila, taking care of him at the same time. The Ashkin snarls and says in a low tone, "My friend, I will tear into you deeply enough to feast on your bones, let me--" And now his mouth is covered.

"OW! Okay, yep, getting you a fucking muzzle right now," Ares says as his hand is bitten into. At least the vampire manages to drag his friend out of the area too.

...That leaves the staff member stabilizing Morana, Genji, and Irimi in the room, with the distant sound of struggle. Needless to say, the 'coyotes' have been angered.

Drystan speaks through Morana's mouth, confidently. "If you destroy me, or even somehow convince me to release her, she will die. I am the only one who can stabilize her. Other voidsent will make a far...far worse pact..." he laughs.

Which leads to the following scene...

## Chapter 12: Feral Ashkin

Flora & Finn have been put in City prison. Y'sila is going to visit them...

Falls murmurs to Y'sila, "Be careful, Yssy. If you get close to those bars, they'll eat you alive."

"Yeah, I know." She removes her gauntlet to show Falls exactly what happens when you restrain a pissed off Ashkin. "It's a damn good thing they were weakened. Light, Morana's attack dogs are scary." She then bites her lip, sighing. "...Not that I can blame them. We were asking a lot. Their necromancer visiting the City is a rare occasion... they feel her getting extremely wounded, come to

stand by her side, and then we demand for them to leave. They were just being loyal to her. Genji and Irimi are strangers to them. Finn only met Irimi twice, and doesn't know Elias very well. I am worried about Ares, I hope he's not too torn up about having to 'escort' his friend like that."

Her gaze then hardens. "But. Either way, I'll go in and see if I can calm them down."

She knows inwardly that will definitely not be the case. This is especially the case when she strolls down and in view of Finn's cell first.

He's standing there with his hands clasped behind his back, staring at the wall. He turns his head slightly, fixing her in a side-eye. "Hello, Y'sila. Have a seat," he says in a low, soft, musical tone that rings as eerie. When he gestures to the chair in his cell, the paladin snorts.

"I'm not going anywhere near you right now. I'm assuming you will not believe me when I say Morana is fine?"

Finn would now turn and stroll slowly up to the bars of the cell, keeping Y'sila fixed in his stare. He is no longer smiling. He would suddenly grab the bar of the cell, baring his fangs at her, his eyes no longer with a moon-like glow... but purely jet black. "You know what I think you taste like, kitten chow? A nice, warm serving of garlean-garlic-spiced salmon. You and your partner go fishing together a lot, I heard. I think that flavour profile would be accurate. Maybe I should ask Flora. We both will be able to dine on your flesh soon. Mark my words. And I will be smiling the entire time~" he practically sings.

Y'sila holds her ground. "I know you and her are pissed. I know saying this is meant to unnerve enemies. But I'm not swayed, and this isn't helpful."

"What would be helpful is if you LET ME THE FUCK OUT SO I CAN RIP YOU TO SHREDS!" he snarls, suddenly tugging at the bars and shoving his arm through them, trying to grab at Y'sila, who's definitely made sure to place herself out of range. He snaps his jaws once, then twice, truly like the zombies from legend trying to get at prey.

"LIGHT your species is creepy as hells when feral, I think you win out over vampires because you are able to actually speak beyond 'blood, must feed, blood...'"

"She tastes as you describe, Finn," comes a calm, feminine voice from nearby. "I will make sure you're able to verify that when we tear through this place." Flora is staring at Y'sila with the same

jet-black stare from her cell, her head tilted at such an angle that it appears her neck is broken. Either way it's an eerie trick that causes even the paladin to pause.

"...If you two weren't in cells, this would turn into a horror movie," Y'sila growls. "... for who, I do not know, since I'd be cutting you down."

Flora bares her teeth as well, straightening her neck and slamming her shoulder against the bars. It does nothing, and she curses. "You can't hide from us forever. Here kitty kitty kitty... I will pet you before I tear your heart out and bloody your fur."

"Right, I'm not sure which of you is more terrifying right now," Y'sila murmurs.

Finn chimes in behind her, calmer for the moment than just before, as if a switch has been flipped. Though by no means is he back to himself. Just... his calm, eerie hunger. "If you come just a touch closer, I can snap your neck, and then eat you. You won't feel a thing. If you do not, well. When I find you again, I will make sure you are alive so that you can feel every single bite." He clicks his tongue. "Which is the more...fun option. You'll scream. Just like lambs do when being dragged off for slaughter. You'll always hear them screaming, Y'sila. You will be one of them."

"And now we're referencing a horror movie. Coming from you, I am not surprised," Y'sila sighs. "...I am so glad I am one of the few seeing you two like this because I know it's not truly you. You're going to feel so apologetic when you're snapped out of it."

Flora snarls out, "We are capable of making it quick. We will choose not to." A promise.

Y'sila turns toward her. "... Y'know, when you two are okay again, I'm going to bring this up every time either of you question why people find you so terrifying. I hope you know that."

...and so it went.

([Inspired by: Silence of the Lambs & This music video](#). Bonus: Finn's voice claim (both regular talking & singing) is the lead singer, Spencer, so he can essentially sing this song.))

## Chapter 13: Snap out of it!

Later, Morana awakens, carried in by Y'sila to snap the Ashkin out of it.

=====

The moment Finn sees Morana, he snarls out, trying to get to Falls in particular, who is holding her. He sees Falls as a threat toward his necromancer, and quickly snaps, "I am going to devour your entire damn body, Falls, I--"

Morana hushes him gently. "Finny... this isn't you... I'm frightened... what is going on?" She then looks up toward Falls. "Bring me closer."

"What?! But -- he's going to --"

"Please, Falls... We're safe here, yes? I t-think... I need... to get closer..."

Falls gulps, her tails spiking up, but she does as she's told. Finn grins darkly as Falls gets into grapping range. He's weakened but can still strike a blow if she gets too close, which would be painful. Then, his eyes fix on Morana, though, and he pauses. Morana reaches through the bars and places a hand on his cold cheek. "...It's o-okay. I'm a-alive. I n-need you to stay here with me and come out of that rage... please."

Finn blinks.... again... and again... and slowly, the moon-like glow of his eyes returns. "Morana," he whispers. "You're okay..." He reaches up and places his hand over hers. That's when his own eyes fade to fear, and he lets go, stumbling back in his cell. "Oh gods.... oh gods... what have I done?! I - I... I remember everything, I -- damn it, shit, oh no... I...." He covers his face, his eyes wide with horror at himself.

Falls sighs in relief, but before Morana can comfort Finn, the Miqu'te would turn to Flora. "Her too, please..." Falls mutters.

Morana whimpers, uncomfortable in Falls's arms, but she can't walk. She's brought to the bars of Flora, who would bare her teeth toward Falls. Flora says, "This trickery will not be tolerated. You may have fooled Finn, but--"



Morana reaches through the bars and cups her cheek as well, staring Flora down. "...W-we need to go. Now. I need you to be okay."

Flora's eyes fade to normal as well, and she gasps... "... O-oh... o-oh my....."

Falls says, "Okay - so you can't leave for at least a week, you're so sapped of aether that's my estimation for how long it would take. No potions, as you're too weak to process them right now, and it would burn you out. Let's get you, and them, to the dragon dens. Nice and settled in the same room together, separate from everyone else. Will that be okay? Morana, Yssy will come in and explain what happened. I just need you to hold on a bit longer."

Morana shudders, all the fight taken out of her. She whispers, "... I want to return to base. I need to leave this place. Please.. I need to go home." She sounds very heartbroken, and Falls winces. But there's nothing that can be done aside from Falls's plan right now.

## Chapter 14: No, you're staying.

Too low on aether to leave yet, Morana has to remain in the City (specifically the rooms in the dragon dens) with the Ashkin. Rumour has it, they plan on leaving to never return.

*Enter Ares...*

While the Ashkin have no idea what they're doing, a certain someone prowls the bird room, his arm wrapped from a recent chunk taken out of it. Ares sighs. Sparrow is doing her news-related stuff. Callista is still lost. And Finn is moping. Well, he can maybe fix that last one, but flicks his tail anxiously.

Would he stress his friend out too much? He ponders this for a while, almost leaving him be (1).

But then, he narrows his gaze. "You know what? This isn't helpful. He's not the type who minds being poked and annoyed until he stops his bullshit. Or at least, after the fact. Time to go bother him." (16) Thankfully, Ares knows exactly where to find the hiding Ashkin, as City regulars would know of the mysterious Ashkin babysitting dragonets quite often, and therefore having their very own room in there with them.

Ares wanders into the room to find some very annoyed dragonets. Three: Ras, the rambunctious one, Swift, the shy one, and Oon...the biter. Ras takes one look at Ares and complains, "Oh good, you're here! Tell our Ashkin to get his butt out here and play! We had an adventure set up and he's hiding! He's being a JERK!"

Swift says softly, "H-he could have a reason... erm... I wish he'd stop hiding, though... our adventure was going to be fun."

Oon says, "I'm gonna SO bite him when he comes out for his insolence! The FOLLY of our Ashkin! THE FOLLLY I SAY!" they whine.

Ares smiles, beaming at the little ones. Finn's always done so well to entertain the children in the City, often playing a defeated 'villain' to make them smile. He's a natural. He wonders in the back of his mind if Finn had children when he was alive...and what could have happened to them.

He shakes that thought off, and laughs. "HAH! What a loser, not showin' up. I'll put him in his place, I promise. You juuuust wait," he snickers.

He ascends the stairs and knocks on the door, met with total silence. Giving a growl, he murmurs, "Finn? Are you doing being an emo-jock? C'mon, yer a goth-jock, now act like one! What's with all of the moping? I said I was sorry."

The Ashkin inside widen their eyes, and Morana looks positively terrified of Ares. She slowly grabs the blanket and wraps it around herself, and over her head, like a hood. She mouths 'I'm not here' to Finn. Finn gives her an apologetic smile, then bites his lip. If he had a heart, it would be pounding.

Flora gestures to Finn to take care of this - Ares is his friend, after all.

Finn finally sighs and cracks the door open a bit so that one of his moon-glowing eyes fixes on Ares. "Ares, my friend," he says in a low, soft tone. "Please accept my apology for devouring some of your flesh during my... loss of control. My people and I will be leaving, but as revenge, you can take a bite from me as well. Please do not kill me, however, as that would cause much conflict between our factions."

“Why the FUCK are you being so formal?!” Ares growls, and then Finn’s words click. He’s not taking this well(3). “Oh you’ve got to be kidding me. You’re running because what, Morana got hurt?! Are you serious?! Is she your wife or something?! Now you’re all going to just... go away?!”

Finn’s cheeks flush a light blue, and he says softly, “I am with no one at the moment, and nor is she. You know we use the term ‘mistress’ as similar to retainers to their commanders, because she is our necromancer. It is not because she is hurt that we are leaving. We are a danger to your people, Ares. That was demonstrated clearly.”

Ares gives Finn a deadpan look, and lashes his tail. “You and I JUST fucking talked about how much we hated that damn trope after rewatching Twilight while SLAMMED. Now you’re pulling that? What, do you sparkle now too, Edward?” He bats his eyelashes in a mocking tone at Finn.

Finn is trying his very best not to laugh at that and joke along with his friend. It’s hard. He clears his throat. “...Ares this is serious,” Finn mutters. “I hurt you, I threatened Y’sila in so many horrible ways, just the look of me made Irimi pass out... We’re not natural things. We do not want to die... but it’s best for us to return where we are not a threat to people, including those here.”

Ares gives a low hiss, clenching his jaw at Finn before narrowing his gaze. “Y’know I was just speaking to Irimi and I had said you were rational but I take that the fuck back. You, and your little pack who’s hiding from me right now, aren’t going anywhere until I know for a fact you’re not leaving out of either fear of hurting anyone else, or fear of everyone else.”

Flora and Claudia exchange a glance, wondering if that was a threat. Not much they could do about it if so. Claudia shudders and backs toward the wall again, really wishing she was home right now. Morana takes a deep breath, keeping herself stable. She had been trying to get used to someone particularly scary(..Ares), but now that was pointless, given they were leaving. She never quite shook how terrifying Ares was, and never would get the chance.

So she thought.

Because Ares was having none of this bullshit. Finn considers a response, and would open his mouth to say something, but be interrupted by Ares speaking again. “Also, you’re wanting me to bite you? I didn’t know you wanted to explore that shit,” he says, giving a low chuckle, and speaking in a flirtatious tone. “Think I can get you to whimper for more after the first bite?”

And now Finn's cheeks flush even further. Normally his oblivious 'huh?' attitude kicks in, but he's hyper aware of social context right now, and clears his throat. "...T-that is not why I suggested it, my friend. Relations between anyone of us and anyone here right now are a bad idea."

"Oh, shy, suddenly, are we?" Ares snickers. He then grows serious, however. "Finn. **Listen.** To me. Look, dude, I know Morana got hurt, and I know you all care about her deeply. It's unfortunate what happened. I get that. But not too long ago, your people lashed out at outsiders, didn't you? You all thought we were evil, intent on tearing you to pieces, and so, you needed to expand territory before we did that. How'd that work out for you? I hate pulling this card, but you all were total assholes before we saved your sorry skins and showed you kindness. That guy had no chance to learn about your lot. He doesn't know your story. Ashkin, and Garleans, have done a lot on this star. So have necromancers. I'm not making an excuse for him so much as coming to an understanding. He stayed and got rid of that parasite. He didn't have to. Don't let what he did initially chase you away. He went out of his way to make up for what he did. So many people have come to love your people here. Me, included. Finn, we're best friends. Does that mean anything to you?" Ares must have been informed of the situation through Elias, one of the few who now has the full story.

"I-it does... but..." Finn says softly.

"But what? There's no buts." Ares places his hand on the doorframe and leans against it. "You chewed on me. Great. That happens here all the time. If you haven't noticed...? We're a **FUCKING CITY OF MONSTERS**. This is expected, and, hey, there's protocol for it to reduce or outright eradicate the danger involved. In other words, people like me intercepting when that happens.. You bit me, big whoop. I'll get you back. You said some aggressive things. **BIG FUCKING WHOOP**. Do you think Y'sila gives even half of a damn?!"

"...Probably not... but--"

"Soooo... what are you still doing in there?!"

"Ares, we... er... well, we'd have to talk about this..."

"Okay, and in the meantime, think of, I dunno, **KALI**. We were going to continue the search for clues. You're gonna throw that all away because you decided to be an emo-ass brat?!"

Finn flinches. Oooo, everything else cut deep, but that cuts deeper. He swallows, closing his eyes. He finally says, "...I'll... think about it. Let me talk to the others. Okay? They can hear you too. Let me just... .. grasp the situation. Okay?" (17)

Ares ponders this, and sighs. "...Fine. Can you promise me you won't just disappear?! And that includes your comrades. You all were trying to learn how to live, not hide. Don't let this stop you. Please."

"...I promise."

"Ladies?" Ares says.

Morana twitches an eye and says nothing (5). Flora, however, speaks up, and says, "...We'll be here, Ares. We won't leave Finn alone here, after all."

Satisfied enough.. The Xaela heads out, now stomping off and lashing his tail. At least he got Finn to promise.

## Chapter 15: Taking Control

Well, they do end up leaving, but not for long. Finn hesitantly comes back to the City of Monsters to be more social, as he can't stay away from his new friends for long. He catches wind of the City needing help against some new enemies. He joins a rescue mission, only to be, well... killed. He's ressurected by Morana, who's also returned to the City for this emergency.

...His comatose remains at the three day mark and there's no progress. His body can't accept fluids or nutrients like those among the living. He needs to feed, or he will begin to degrade. He's looking very gaunt...

\*\*\*\*\*

Meanwhile... elsewhere....

Snapping awake, Morana gasps, holding her hand over her heart.

Something is wrong.

“No... no no no... he can't slip away. No.”

She darts out of the bed she's been staying in and falls to her side, letting out a soft groan. She needs to get to him, she needs to make sure he doesn't truly die. Dragging herself up, she's noticed there's no medics around. No one. They must be busy elsewhere....

She would rush over to the side of Finn's bed... he looks gaunt. This isn't looking good. “Finn!” she gasps, feeling him slip away. She's so low on aether. She's so low on...everything. Taking in a deep breath, she tries. “Stay with me... stay with me...”

Tears start streaming down her cheeks as she lets out a whimper. “Please stay with me...”

Finn opens his eyes. He looks up at Morana, blinking. Then... he gives a soft smile. Morana takes him into a hug, crying on his shoulder. “I thought I lost you, I thought—”

“Hey,” Finn says in a weak voice, giving her a hug before very gently pushing her away. Something.... Is still wrong. He tilts his head, giving a soft yawn. “... Morana... I'm sorry,” he says in an exhausted tone. “I..can't hold on anymore. But I wanted to say goodbye. Truly. Thank you for this second chance.... I love you, and all of our comrades, so dearly. Don't forget me. Alright? Please say goodbye to everyone for m-me... Ares and Sparrow too... find Kali. She's hurting out there.”

“NO! FINN PLEASE! NO!”

Finn reaches up and cups her cheek, yawning again. “...I'm so sorry, Morana... so sorry...”

His eyes...flicker out.

....

....

....

Morana wakes up sobbing, her entire body shuddering. This has been the worst nightmare yet, and she can barely handle it. She pulls herself out of bed, heading toward where Finn is. Claudia and Flora rush over to her, and Flora has her lean on her shoulder.

“Morana! Oh no... another one? He's okay, he's here still, we can feel it...” Flora whispers, then takes the crying woman into a hug.

Claudia frowns deeply, a tear trickling down her cheek. This is a rough time... possibly the worst she's seen the necromancer.

When Morana pulls away from the hug though, she does notice Finn is very gaunt... it's been four days and he hasn't been able to eat. He doesn't take in fluids or anything like normal, and what she's doing isn't enough.

She knows what she has to do.

And she doesn't have much time left to hesitate.

But it's tearing her to pieces inside....

====

Flora says in a reassuring tone to her, "We will be okay. We do not ever think differently of you because you can do this. You are saving Finn's life...erm. Undeath. It is for a good cause. He will agree. Remember, this is Finn - he would likely ramble about the battle implications." She tries to give a smile.

Morana can't even force a grin. She does say, "...Yeah. He would."

Closing her eyes... she sighs.

There's a... chill in the room. The temperature begins climbing down, to the point where Morana can see her own breath. No one else in this room would be able to see their own breath, as theirs wouldn't be warm. Though, if anyone were to enter right now, it would be similar to stepping outside into the calm after a blizzard. The door wouldn't be locked or blocked. There would just be an...eerie calm about the area.

Morana begins to glow a miasma of dark blue, the color of the aether that flows through the veins of her Ashkin. After taking in another deep breath, she allows her pupils to grow and cover her entire eye. The lights flicker eerily, but remain on. Tendrils of aether reach out toward and attach to Finn like branching capillaries.

Morana utters command, her voice holding an eerie, unnatural echo to it.

*Rise.*

["Rise."]

Finn twitches... once. Then twice. Then again. He jolts up, his movements unnatural. When he opens his eyes, he fixes them on Morana.

They are pitch black.

Morana clenches her jaw, then glances toward Flora. She gives a nod... Flora wanders up to the freezer and pulls out a bag of...parts. She tears it open with a swift motion and places it on Finn's lap. Severed limbs spill out on Finn's lap. Morana's breath hitches, and she needs to keep all of her focus on this. She usually avoids trying to watch her Ashkin eat...

The next command is uttered.

*"Consume."*

["Consume."]

Finn would begin tearing into the flesh like a starved animal, gulping down chunks like he'd never eaten anything in his life. Morana keeps her eyes locked on him as he does so. She's going to wait until he eats everything, and then will let him rest.

In a normal voice, she says to Flora... "... I am going to turn around. Please tell me when he is finished." As if the silence from the sound of flesh tearing wouldn't tip her off. Still, she's not thinking straight.

Flora says, "Of course, Morana."

The power of the Necromancer is in full view now, and the reason why so many are afraid. "This is...so wrong... so wrong..." Morana whispers to herself over and over. She feels her heart shattering into a thousand pieces because she had to take control. She could do so easily, turn these people she brought back into true minions, souls trapped in bodies they couldn't hope to ever control again, watching as they did the unspeakable....

It was all. So. wrong.



She stared at her hands, shaking like a leaf. She'd never done this before to her people, those who had their souls and weren't just puppeted corpses of the long departed. The capability of great horrors and harm were at her fingertips, but it was never a thought that crossed her mind.

Finn wasn't there right now. He was still entirely unconscious. Yet... he consumes.

Morana covers her face with her hands.

Irimi listened to her, her own heart dropping hearing the pain in the Necromancer's voice.

"Morana. I know you don't see it right now, but you're doing the right thing. You really really are."

The amount of sorrow in Morana's voice was evident she didn't want to do this- Irimi could tell. But Irimi then looked to Flora nodding but then asked the same question to Morana, "May I approach you?"

Morana continues to stare at Irimi. "...They need to have their wills... I brought them back because of their screams... I c-could hear them... but not like... normal hearing..." She's babbling a bit now but can't help it. "...They deserved a second chance... but need full control of themselves. I am failing him... This is so wrong... s-so wrong..." It's almost like she ...misses Irimi's question.

There's a five second pause. Then, a whispered, "...yes."

Flora, meanwhile, walks forward cautiously, as to not disturb Irimi. She would watch this exchange carefully, not wanting to interrupt, but wanting to be there to explain and answer questions further before someone made the wrong assumptions about what Morana was doing.

Irimi would say nothing to Morana and walk carefully towards her.

Without warning Irimi would kneel down in front of her and take her into a hug.

Morana doesn't do anything for a few seconds, but slowly attempts to hug Irimi back. If she can, she'd bury her face into her shoulder and begin sobbing. The sound of chewing flesh comes to a slow, however.

Flora says gently, "He's done, Morana."

Finn's pitch black gaze would be fixed on Morana as he waits for another command. He looks a lot better now. His cheeks don't seem pulled too close to the bone. His muscle mass has returned, and a few wounds have mended better than before. It's clear he is far, far better off now. But he can't rest yet.

Not without Morana's help.

Morana snuffles, lifting her chin to rest on Irimi's shoulder before uttering one last command. "Rest." Her echoing, commanding tone is tinged with sadness.

The room is still cold, but may slowly begin to grow warmer again. The aether visible aether link melts away, and Morana radiates exhaustion.

Finn's eyes....flicker on as he lays back down. This has actually woken him up. (15) Though he'll still need to actually sleep (as he's indeed not just an animated corpse and (allegedly) uses his brain), he does murmur, "... ... Did I get drunk and go after some of Rook's mercenaries or something...." Irimi would hold Morana tightly, hugging her and not letting go until Morana would pull away.

The word Morana spoke felt... powerful. And much to Irimi's surprise she would hear Finn speak-relieved? To hear him? Irimi sighed relief. "You did great Morana." She whispered to the Necromancer.

Morana is still crying, possibly not hearing Finn at all. She can hear Irimi, as the woman is right there. "...I don't think I did... h-he... had to obey me.. he..."

Finn blinks, then looks over to Claudia. "...Did she use her powers or something?" He can clearly hear Morana now. He looks down at his meal. "Huh. Was I being uncooperative? I-in that frenzy again?!" he gasps, now widening his eyes in alarm.

"No, no, it's alright. You took a hit and died three times... and she needed to command you to eat. You were completely comatosed," Claudia murmurs.

"Oh..." he mutters. "How interesting," he says with a grin. "...The implications in a war situation are--" he cuts himself off, giving Claudia an apologetic stare when she facepalms. He then focuses on a sobbing Morana and Irimi hugging her close. And then looks down at the bones on his lap. "....

I am too tired to clean this up, damn it..." He would casually try to pull the blanket over said bones to be less alarming. Three cheers for the bloody golden retriever! He's trying to be helpful!

"Hey, Morana? Are you alright?" Finn asks. He looks toward Irimi. "Are you alright?!" The last he remembered of her was, well... right before Genji woke up. He has no idea what's going on and appears hopelessly confused. He's shirtless and hooked up to all sorts of things right now that don't do much to help monitor him, but are worth a shot. At least the aetheric-activity tracker is working on him.

**And with that, the story is in progress!**

## Relevant Solo Scenes

# Gloomy Angels: Nimie's Story

Everything hurt.

Her gums especially, though the recent lacerations on her flesh from that damned scalpel did a number too.

Nimie wanted to die.

But Rook wouldn't let her.

Every time the vampire exhaled, a whimper-like noise left her lungs. Her eyes were partially closed. She was glad she regrew her eyelids so she could close them now. That had been a 'fun' little experiment by Rook. A crash sounded nearby, and she really wasn't comprehending what was happening now. She could scent the blood rushing through the veins of someone coming closer.

When she looked up, she saw not one, but several people. All with glowing eyes, staring her down. Nimie peeled back her lips and let out a long, drawn out hiss, pressing against the back of her cell. Drool poured down her chin. Such a far cry from the skilled pirate she was outside of this place, and even further back, a complete contrast to her status of nobility she walked away from.

A monster in rags, to rot and die here. What did she see in those eyes? An eerie feminine voice rang out "Listen up. I do not like you. I am not your friend, I do not want anything to do with you monsters. But no one deserves this." She had no idea what was going on, but the cell was blasted open.

Why couldn't she scent the people with her?! She had no idea what was going on. They had no heartbeat, no scent aside from the strong blast of ceruleum. Except for the woman standing before her, kneeling there. Nimie snarled and lunged out of nowhere, but her jaws locked onto the mysterious, scentless people. She began to drink, but it tasted like raw aether, and she began to calm down.

"Get her to one of the corpses left behind," the commanding feminine voice growled.

With that one bite, Nimie lost all strength. Frenzy was over, and though she was now in control, there was no second wind. She slumped, falling to the floor with a whimper. She managed to snarl out a garble of words that were incoherent. She was trying to tell them to leave her alone.

They didn't.

Warm, fresh blood flowed down her throat, revitalizing her. Her eyes closed as she drank, and slowly, she found herself fading away...

*No... no! Please, I need to stay awake, I need to get away...*

As everything faded to black, Nimie realized she was being taken somewhere.

-----  
Groaning, Nimie began to come to, feeling dizzy and a touch sick. She held her stomach, trying not to spew everywhere. The first thing she noticed was that she was on a bunch of cushions and covered in blankets. She was also in new clothing made from a material she didn't know. There was a light sting to her wounds, but also a warmth, like salve had been applied.

The hum of machines hit her ears, causing them to pull back somewhat. She leaned against a cold, stone concrete wall to realize she was surrounded by rusty fencing. Where was she? Some sort of factory? Was she going to be torn to pieces and processed?!

Nimie whimpered, covering her eyes and starting to sob. She didn't touch the blankets even though she was shivering profusely. Was this another part of Rook's sick plan? She was a wreck, and this carried on for hours until she laid there on the cushions, shuddering and clenching her jaw. She opened her eyes and sat up, looking around again to discover someone staring at her.

With no scent.

She let out a bloodcurdling scream at the sight of eerie, glowing pale eyes on her. Her heart began to thud, and her stomach clenched. She was under enough stress that the edges of her vision began to darken, and she fell onto the pillow, shuddering. Very shortly following that, she blacked out for another few hours.

Waking up again, she was here in the factory, not on the table, and a blood bag was by her head. She hissed, refusing to drink it. The blood Rook gave burned. But eventually, she gave in, knowing she would starve otherwise. Her body betrayed her there - she drank the blood bag, but it was actually pleasant. Fresh, rich blood... no added chemicals. No burning as it went down.

When she looked up again she met those eyes. She began to shudder again, this time actually pulling the blankets closer, leaning against the wall. Finding her voice, she snarled, "Oi, who are you? Am I to die here?" No response. The person staring her down was in shiny black material, and... oh hells, they had a third eye. This was a Garlean, again with no vital signs.

Nimie thought this through for a moment. She'd encountered things like this before... What was it? Ashkin, right. From afar. They had no vitals either, they were zombies. With that eerie eye glow and complete lack of sound or scent from them, aside from cereleum, that was her best guess. But...Garleans. She'd read about the horrors they committed, yet never experienced them herself.

She didn't trust this one bit.

No answers, either. She continued to cry into her hands until she had no more tears to cry.

---

A day later, Nimie was approached by a man with one eye, the other covered by an eyepatch. He was terrifying, a muscular Garlean with a stare even more frightening than the zombies. He was doing that to her right now. He said in a low, gravelly voice with somewhat of an echo to it, "I am going to bring you to the bathroom. You can take care of yourself there." He narrowed his eye. There were no words of reassurance here.

Nimie responded to this by hissing at him and pressing further against the wall. Her crimson stare was locked on the zombie as he got closer. "One step closer and I'll tear right through your BLOODY DAMN ARM, ya understand?! I know you're a DAMN Ashkin, I know you're a DAMN Garlean, ya better fuckin' let me out of here or so help me I'll show you why I'm called 'Nimie Vicebite' ya fuck."

Well, she was very vocal, and probably cussed Rook out the entire time too. Sure, she started off as a noblewoman. But she'd been a pirate for over five years. The zombie actually let out a sigh, his eye managing to harden. He continued, until suddenly, he lunged, grabbing her arm and causing her to shriek. Now, she was being dragged somewhere while headlocked.

She began to chew on the zombie's arm, but wasn't in frenzy, so her jaw strength simply wasn't out of control, and so, she couldn't chew through his shirt. Very much annoyed by this, slighted, even, Nimie hissed in frustration. "Bugger, what the hells is this made of, huh? Draggin' me off to my death who knows where and I can't even bite through your damn shirt?! How is that fair, eh? Come on, let me go. I'm not tasty. Too much muscle, too gamey, I chew on sailors so am probably way too salty."

Now, they were going up some stairs. Nimie did not have enough strength to counter the zombie, and she panted, too tired to continue her struggle. So, she continued to hiss, snarl, growl, and cuss at him. "Bastard. Kickin' someone already down, eh? Not even tellin' me how I'm gonna die? That scientist sure did, she described every fuckin' thing she was gonna do to me. Damn it, let me GO ya fucker!"

Up more stairs.

Nimie shrieked as she met the eyes of more Ashkin she had no idea were there. What was this place?! She whimpered, remaining silent until they got to... a bathroom. Like the intimidating fellow said. She was placed on the ground. Then, the zombie stepped back, keeping his stare on her.

Immediately, Nimie hissed at him again. "This some sick joke, eh? Cleanin' up your food before taking a nice, big, bite? What, gonna tear me to pieces? Just do it then, enough of these damn games!"

The zombie loomed over her as she crouched there on the ground, growling at him. She had no ability to do anything against him, either. She flinched back, swallowing. That deep, gravelly voice was soft now, but very threatening. "Take care of yourself in there. Or." A scowl spread across his face. "You will learn how it feels to be devoured by Ashkin. Do I make myself clear?"

Nimie hissed at him, swiping toward him with her claws.

The zombie continued. "Towels. Blankets. Spare clothing with the towels. All of what you need. Behave."

Nimie snapped her jaws at him, her heart pounding, but eventually crept into the shower and tucked herself into the corner. She began to softly cry again, shuddering, her bravado draining from her now that she was out of sight from the zombie.

Eventually, she needed to listen, or she'd become Ashkin chow. (She had no idea the threat wasn't serious, the zombies did not in fact have vampire on the menu.) When her shower concluded, she stayed in there, closing her eyes.

His voice rang out again. "I am taking you back to your place of rest should you be finished."

"If I stay in here in the nude, will ya fuckin' leave me alone?!" Nimie snapped, though the idea of doing that really wasn't something that she wanted to do. She closed her eyes, clenching her jaw.

In a matter-of-fact tone, the zombie replied from behind the curtain, "I can throw a large blanket over you and direct you back to the spot."

"Oh, oh, 'direct', yes of course! Ya mean drag my ass down several stairs and toss me into a practical cell, right, right, 'direct', ya fucker," Nimie snapped. She sighed and grabbed the spare clothes, then put them on. "Fine, I'm dressed in my church best, all ready for whatever twisted plan ya got for me. Bastard."

She slunk out from behind the curtain to face the zombie, who did not look amused. He glared her down and approached, causing her to shrink down, her lip quivering. Her stomach twisted, and she covered her



face, her panic overcoming her again. Suddenly, she was in his arms, again. This time carried, not dragged. She didn't remove her hands from her face until she was placed down again.

Here...on the cushions.

There were now some books here, too. A bunch of manual and science books. How exciting.

She sighed, more confused than ever, and closed her eyes, rubbing her temples. She grabbed several blankets and pulled them over her, her back now facing the entrance of this place, where the zombies guarded. With that, she let herself doze off, still completely drained of energy and not doing great.

---

It went like that for three days.

On the fourth, she began to suspect there was something off. In other words, the zombies had not opted to eat her, she hadn't been dragged to a table, and she was actually recovering. A very terrifying medicus zombie had visited and asked her in a dangerous, flat, tone, how she'd been feeling.

"Like a bag of shite, that's how I'm feelin', bastards. Tell me what's going on! Please? Just get it over with quickly if you're going to do something," she had said. She snapped her fangs and swiped at any zombie that tried getting too close, making the medicus's life miserable. The medicus, of course, did not explain what they were doing. So, she figured they were malicious.

Either way, she was once again fine. These zombies manhandled her when she tried escaping, but she paid a lot of attention - they never actually hurt her. What was their deal?! Were they trying to help her? Why were they acting like this?

Nimie sighed.

As she gained strength, escape attempts became more frequent. The vampire grew more crafty and could trick the zombies and get a little far before being intercepted. She calculated the patrol routes and tricked them into thinking, at times, she was asleep when really, she wasn't.

This was one of those times she got pretty far. Up the stairs, juking the zombies, she chuckled to herself at the mess she was making. She knew by now they would not hurt her. At this point, she misbehaved so much to see if she could trigger their aggression (aside from actually attacking them, unless trying to chew on their arm when dragging her back counted) and see if she could end this all faster.

Nope.

She was almost positive they were trying to frighten her on purpose. To be honest, it worked really well, but it didn't stop her from trying to get some answers.

She could hear her heartbeat. The necromancer. Intensifying as she rounded the corner and stared at the lookout, which reminded her of what archers utilized. With a low, dangerous growl, she met the pale gaze of the woman. "What is going on here, eh? What are you bastards doing, why are you keeping me here? Are you helping me? Say it! Say something! You all can talk, I know it! Tell me—AUGH!"

A strong arm linked around her chest, pulling her against one of the zombies. The one-eyed one. Great, he was the scariest. What did Nimie do?! CHOMP. She began to try and chew on his arm, growling and thrashing like mad. Hearing him sigh in her ear, she pulled hers back.

And down she went. Back to where she'd be guarded by the damn zombies, fed, and met with silence. At least there were some holes in the scary zombie's arm sleeve now, but that had taken a lot of escape and a lot of chewing. He'd probably repair it, but – "You know. With a sewing needle, I could fix that for you. Eh? Eh? Only payment is to tell me what's going on!"

She was placed on the cushions. She glared at the zombie as he stepped back. Right now, there was a blank, inquisitive look on his face, but that hardened into a scary one as he clenched his jaw and stepped forward. Nimie shrank back, grabbing the blankets and pulling them over herself, whimpering. "I get it, I get it," she whispered.

---

Time to leave, though Nimie had no idea. She was now given chemicals in her blood that made her sleepy, nearly knocking her out. She watched through narrowed eyes as she was carried outside into the cold. Trying to stay awake. What was happening?! They went onto a...large skeletal dragon, causing her heart to pound.

Was this it?

She didn't know how much time passed, but there, in the distance, was an aetheryte. She was placed on the ground some distance away. She felt eyes on her as she came to, and managed to stand and limp, walking toward the aetheryte. They were going to play with her.

Intercept her.

Or...something. But freedom was so close... she just needed to get away... to get to where others would be, to help her...

She looked over her shoulder. Those pale eyes remained on her, staring her down. Panic set in, and she began to run unsteadily until almost slamming into one of the guards working in the contingent. "Help," she whimpered. "...Help."

She...got the help. She got out of there. She survived. Somehow, from some miracle, she survived. The Adders called upon Falls, who brought her to the City of Monsters, where she made a full recovery, at least in body.

What happened during that week-long span? Who were those Garlean zombies? She didn't know...

**Nimie's experience: End!**

## Can I eat them?

**When the City and Gloomhaven formed their alliance, not everyone was on board with them getting off with just a slap on the wrist...**

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

The hammer slammed upon the weapon on the anvil as Varana worked. Her huge eyes were fitted with custom goggles just for her. Her scaled tail lashed back and forth as she worked. The bipedal dragon was proud of her work here as one of the blacksmiths of the City of Monsters. That...and many other things. Her miqote 'sister' taught her well as an omnicrafter. Now, here she was, hard at work.

The last few clangs of the hammer marked her task as finished for the day. She reached up with her wings and took off her goggles, given her arms were just a touch too short to do so. Two extra limbs helped in this regard. Anyway, she sighed, thinking over what Falls had told her about the Garlean Ashkin situation.

Stomping off to her room she shared with her may-as-well-be-a-sister-now, she grabbed a pen for adding some more things she thought up wall working to the list.

Entering the room, she took in a deep breath, then yawned. Immediately, her roommate looked up: A dragon named Freyja, forever connected to Sam, an Auri guard of the City of Monsters. The dragon grunted in greeting, structured differently than Varana. While Varana chose the path of crafting, Freyja was a beastie of pure battle.

“Welcome back!” Freyja said. She peered at the pen in Varana’s scaled paw, then laughed. “Adding more for your future ‘friends’ to get? Look, why not just eat one or two? They were fresh! The humanoid ones. Not decayed. The one we have in the prison smells tasty as hells. Come on, live a little!”

Varana sighed, shooting her close friend a look. “No,” Varana said. “We are not eating the zombies. They owe us a great deal and will pay back for the destruction they wrought. My list of demands is ever increasing. I would rather receive a 5,000 word essay from each explaining how they intend on changing for the better and how apologetic they are for their aggression.” Oh, Varana wasn’t joking. She meant to make them write it. All of them. Their necromancer would need a 10,000 word essay to qualify for an accepted apology.

Freyja groaned. “I am sure they’d rather be eaten than that. Just a bite. They could use a thrashing! They’re Ashkin, Ashkin are tough! I swear on my tail I will not take more than a few bites. Those rascallions deserve it after all the trouble they put us through. The lives lost and disrupted. Justice will be served by several chomps!”

“They are Cass’s responsibility,” Varana replied, unamused. “She will not let you bite her people. They are hers now. Your suggestions will be frowned upon. Mine are carefully calibrated to a meticulous degree. While you are all ‘violence is the answer’, I am looking into what we are owed and then some to make up for the damages and lives lost. Now - the lives lost will never be replaced. But now that they are tamed monsters thanks to our cupcake-loving Pixie-Hollow-Denizen, they can be held accountable and given options to improve.”

“Options?!” Freyja whined. “You mean non-negotiable items you will lecture them regarding for hours if one thing is out of place or not given!”

“I will,” Varana confirmed. “And it is much more productive than ‘Can I bite them’. My dear friend, I know you and yours are nearly rabid, like many of the monsters here, but save your chomps for where they are needed. Your scale sister and you will find something to disrupt, I have no doubt about that.”

“Are you making fun of me?” Freyja asked, amused. She stomped over to Varana and loomed over her. “If you’re ordering a fight, you’ve got—”

BONK!

“GAH!” Freyja growled. Already, Varana was wiping her hammer with a cloth, staring at Freyja with a less than amused look. That hammer could do some work! Varana was great at drawing it with a quick paw.

“Crafter does not mean non-combatant, my dear friend. Now! Yes. I was poking fun. Go rest. No munching on zombies. If I change my mind, I will certainly let you know. You have bigger things to worry about with regard to protecting City borders than some misbehaving Garlean Ashkin. I know you and Sam are disappointed you cannot in fact bite them, but as I said. There will be other targets,” Varana scolded.

Grumbling, Freyja stomped over to her nest and collapsed. “You’re no fun!” she said, snickering. “Fine. Just how are you gonna get the item requests on that gigantic list to your quarry?” Said list of course was a scroll that kept rolling...and rolling...and rolling...

“Herding cats, my dear friend,” Varana said. “By that, I mean Falls. When she can get the attention of Miss Cupcakes, in the far future when her necromancer and Ashkin are even better behaved and less frightened, we will present these requests. Given the opportunity, I will oversee their methodology.”

“You just want to be there so you can lecture and scold them!” Freyja complained. “See, I would be there to give them a fight. If they were worthy.”

“No. No more fights with their lot. Your scaled behind can fight them duel-style in the future only if they agree, and only AFTER I have sufficiently confirmed they are indeed tamed by Miss Cupcakes.”

Freyja sighed. “Fine, best I can ask for. Still think letting me eat a couple of them would solve this ‘owe’ problem.”

"I can assure you, it would not," Varana said, stomping over toward her nest. Speaking of 'herding cats', she'd go find Falls later and give that woman another lecture about falling napping in plants that should not be napped in. Her beloved furred sister was a brilliant scientist, but also an airhead.

## "Move on."

**Upon discovering his former lover, Irene, is in the EVA, one of the Ashkin, Kieran, has a decision to make.**

Laying alone in one of the new beds made for the Ashkin, Kieran stares up at the factory ceiling. He whispers, "...Ajax."

That was his name.

He recalls the first time he met Irene. They danced...he was horrible, she was wonderful. He'd been in love with her, he'd fallen hard. Being in the army was difficult, but she was always there for him. Even when she went off to the invasions of 'savages' while he stayed behind to protect his city.

Everything went to shite.

He died while she was gone... and then he was brought back.

Then, she turned into a monster.

Not him.

He takes in a deep breath, then exhales slowly. It feels as though his still heart had been started again one moment, then torn from his chest the next. When his eyes fell upon Irene, everything was bright. She was a flame that lit his passion, someone he was deeply in love with. Standing there, proud, brave. His long lost love. They could be together again now, all could be right, and... ... but...

Then he remembered, just a second later, all she had done.

His heart had twisted into a thousand knots, then shattered into a million pieces. A tear crawls down his cheek, he can't recall the last time he even cried. But here he is, doing so. His jaw clenches, and he tries to focus. Tries to be rational.

Flashes of all the people he and his comrades saved from Rook run through his mind. Or...tried to. Not all of them made it. Some were so brutalized that they perished despite all their efforts. Each and every time, it completely devastated him, like it did the rest.

"Supposedly, she's changed."

He says that to himself flatly, staring up at the ceiling. He feels that pull, that desire to see her again. To rekindle what they lost.

But it's unrealistic. It doesn't change what she's done. They're obligated to be allies. That doesn't mean he is going to accept her. He doesn't know the extent of the Lady's power. He trusts Miss Metal Flower's word on her people's power - he's seen it for himself - but... Kieran then lets out a sigh, reaching up to rub his temples.

Magic could make mistakes, right? Did Irene regret what she contributed to? Would that even matter? And what would he have thought if Garlemald never fell. If he never died? He was fully supportive of the Empire, fighting alongside his Commander to seize power. Or... was he?

That part is foggy, and neither Cedrick or Aedan can quite remember. The cause they were fighting for in the civil war wasn't the most noble of things, but he knew it wasn't anything to the equivalence of what Irene did.

Another tear spilled from Kieran's eyes. He sat up and let out another breath. Then, he began to pen a letter to Irene. He has no idea how it's going to get to her, really. Putting more stress on Cass to deliver it is definitely a no-go. Perhaps he can privately message Finn to quickly pick it up and then return to the City.

He'll contemplate it when the letter is done.

It's a simple, short one.

\*Irene.\*

\*The Ajax you knew is dead.\*

\*Move on\*.

Nine words.

Nine simple words.

He then signs it, one last time, as 'Ajax'. She'd know his signature. She'd be well aware of what his words mean, as well. After all... he'd been with her for so long that they just knew how one another spoke, wrote, and thought. All the hidden messages one could hide in just a few words.

This time, he isn't writing 'I love you'.

He's writing 'goodbye'.

Putting the letter aside, he feels something inside him break. He turns on the makeshift bed, buries his face into his hands, and weeps.

## Badgering, but not by its true definition

"What's up, Kieran?" Finn asks quietly. He'd been laying there on the couch, processing everything, when suddenly a call from Kieran came in.

Kieran considers telling Finn everything, but it's just... too much right now (6). He just says, "You have the aetheryte. Right? Can you do me a favor, comrade? There is a letter I need delivered to our new." A long pause. "...Allies."

"Sure, Kieran, I can do that. Are... you well?"

"No. But I do not want to talk about it."

"Granted. I will leave you be and do as you request."



With that, Finn gets up from the couch and would make his way to the aetheryte. This whole teleport thing is new to him. Does he just...?

He furrows his brow and holds out his hand. "Er. To... Base? Gloom Witch's Base? I th-GH?!"

Suddenly, he ...dissolves, but reforms in an instant? His eyes are as wide as saucers as he looks around the factory. He's home... but Garlemald, that was very odd. He leans against the wall, murmuring to himself, "I am going to have to get used to that...." He reaches up to his linkpearl, and says quietly to Kieran, "Comrade? I am here."

His happy-go-lucky and bright personality is muted right now, in the face of something very serious. Something is wrong with Kieran, he knows it, and wants to be here for him. He would make his way to Kieran and look at the Ashkin, who is still laying there and staring up. Finn says, "...Want me to bring you back something?"

"What would you bring back?" Kieran asks in a tired voice. "I am not among the people who are adapting quickly like you. I do not even know what would be ... helpful... right now."

Finn considers matters, then says softly, "A book? Some chocolate? You like that similarly to Viv, right? Visit from Liadan?"

Kieran's glowing eyes fix on Finn for a moment. He then says, "Nothing will help right now. I need to be alone." His tone is flat, but then softens (11). "I know you want to help us, Finn, to smile. You are a remarkable person for that. I am so happy to call you my comrade. Much as I want to shoo you off and snap at you to go away. I know it would be unreasonable. Sometimes... there is nothing you can do to help. Time. I need time."

Finn dips his head respectfully, giving Kieran a smile. "Okay," he says gently. "If something changes, let me know. I will keep this between us for you, so you can have some rest."

"Thank you," Kieran says. A long pause, and he says, "Go visit Liadan first. I know you want to. The letter is not technically urgent. Before you ask whether or not I am sure, I am."

Finn brightens a touch and nods. He then says, "I will let you know when the message is delivered." With that, the Ashkin departs, unable to discuss the matter with Kieran because, well. He knows

nothing (4). Making his way upstairs, he would enter the makeshift stables. He isn't immediately slammed into by Liadan (6), but the chocobo does look up.

"Kweh?!" Liadan says.

Finn whispers, "Hi there, pretty bird. Long time no see? Oh, come on, it hasn't been a while—"

And then he's on the ground under the chocobo, who's nuzzling into him with her beak and letting out adorable chirping noises. Despite his worry for Kieran, Finn can't help but laugh in delight, reaching up to give her a hug on her chest, as much as he can do so, anyway. "Shh, I missed you too. Aww, who's a good girl?"

"How have things been, Finn?" comes a voice from the shadows. Finn turns his head and grins, spotting Noah.

"Oh boy. I have a good story or two to tell you. How are things here?"

Noah returns Finn's grin, but that soon fades. He lets out a sigh. "...We have been stressed," he mutters. "Grasping what this all means for us. It has been one thing after another. I do not know how to feel."

"Mhm. I am in the same mindset," Finn admits. "But. I just came up to briefly say hi." He would wriggle free of a very displeased Liadan.

"KWEH!" she complains. She nuzzles into him, wanting attention and for him to stay longer for snuggles.

"Aww, pretty bird, I can't stay, but I will be back soon, I promise." Now, Finn would give her a gentle hug around her neck, something she lets a soft 'kweh' too. She can't really understand him, but is catching onto the fact that he has to leave. She gives him one last nuzzle before clicking her beak and going to rest again.

Finn looks toward Noah, a concerned expression in his eyes. "You be well. Make sure mistress somehow smiles. Okay?"

"I will. Do not worry, I know you can make your mischief and chaos quota when you return. You are good at that."

Finn has to give a laugh, flashing him a fully-fanged radiant smile. Then, he would head on downstairs and back to the City of Monsters. He leaves the note on the EVA table - addressed to Irene - before returning to where his comrades are in the City.

Now, he's laying there again, looking up to the ceiling and contemplating matters. So much has changed, and he's met so many new people in a short amount of time. Ares, Sparrow, and Callista are hopefully his new friends. At least - in his eyes, they are.

Winter and Marcus are as well. He's so, so relieved to see Marcus doing okay. That prank was phenomenal. He grins, thinking over all that happened and giving a soft chuckle. But, inevitably, his mind turns to more somber matters.

Something is definitely wrong with Kieran. He will respect his comrade's wishes and not press. It's up to Kieran to approach others if he wants to talk. Finn himself will just say he is worried about some among his people that are clearly suffering.

Then, there's poor Cass. She's going through a lot. There has to be something he can do to help her. His eyelids are growing heavy(2), and he curses in Garlean under his breath. "I have things to do..." he protests in whisper to no one in particular. But, admittedly - he's been going nonstop for a while, and all of this new stuff is taking a toll on his mental awareness. Then, he adds, "Ashkin can go without pause for a long while, this is ludicrous..."

Then, it dawns on him, and he chuckles to himself. Yawning again, he murmurs, "And now I am talking to myself. Yes, I do think I need rest. I resign."

The badger in his new pajamas would close his eyes and finally get some rest.

## Four oh' Four

### **A ship forms!**

There is definitely something wrong with Kieran, and Viv wandered around the factory with a deep frown. He was someone a bit to himself and isolated sometimes, but this time felt different. Eventually, she circled a corner and went up the stairs to the office, poking her head in. Some of her fellows were asleep in here, but others were up and reading, like Holden.

“...Can I talk to you about something?” she muttered.

Holden looked up and tilted his head, but nodded. At the eyebrow raise, he grinned awkwardly. “Right,” he whispered. He then stood up and followed her upstairs, though was a bit tense. The two eventually settled down on the couch, and Viv sat there in contemplative silence for just a bit.

“You alright?” Holden said gently. “Frightened of the future? Of everything happening? I know I’m the most spooked of the bunch - er, sorry. But, well... uh, I am here to help.”

“No,” Viv said, cracking a smile. “I’m not alright, I am frightened of the future, and don’t worry about it, Holden. I just... something is up with Kieran.”

Biting his lip, Holden said, “Oh, well he is usually a bit closed off and gets stressed easily. I could go talk to him and see?” Being an extremely close friend of Kieran’s, Holden often checked up on him, but he’d been so lost in his own head lately. Viv nodded.

“May be a good idea,” she commented.

“Or you could...” Holden said.

“I - no, it’s fine,” Viv said, closing her eyes. “I don’t want to bother him, he’s closer with you.”

“What makes you say that?” Holden mutters. “Oh, is it because you—” He stopped talking right then, especially at the wide-eyed look from Viv (16). Lucky. “Sorry, don’t worry, your secret is safe with me. But, well... maybe it could be helpful.”

“Maybe...” Viv mutters.

“You often send me to check on him because you think I’m closer,” Holden replies. Something Kieran definitely took a notice of. He also admitted some vital information (19) to Holden that the poor Ashkin has to hold deep in his soul like Viv’s thoughts... And it has nothing to do with whatever is happening now.

His eyes spark as he has an idea. “...Think Tony is okay?”

“Yeah, he looked more than ‘okay’,” Viv said. “He is stressed and worried too, and somehow survived being dragged up there with our guests and new comrades who are intimidating but thankfully kind.” They could indeed hear what was going on - Holden and Vivi were trying to adapt to the chocobos and take care of them at the time. They also had peered out as Martha and Antonius had ascended the stairs.

Holden smiles. “Yeah. I think he is more than okay too.” There was a certain look to his eyes. Holden continues, “Need me to escort you to Kieran?”

“Shut up,” Vivi growled, elbowing her comrade, who laughed. “You’ll probably get spooked by a ghost on the way.”

“Good thing Flora isn’t here to spook you with a bear,” he replied, prompting an eye roll.

“That was both of us.”

“I know,” Holden said, amused. He admitted, “A bear out of nowhere can be frightening... surprise bear. L-like the marmots.” Yes, he took Cass completely seriously, and still does, prompting Viv to laugh.

“...Right, if they’re real.”

“Oh, I am sure they are,” Holden said darkly, gulping. Then, he blinked, refocusing on Viv. “You’re avoiding it now. Come on, Vivi. Go talk with him.”

“...Okay,” she muttered. Normally, she relied on both Holden and Finn to hype her up. Finn wasn’t here, but Holden was doing a good job of it. Eventually, she stood up and walked down to where Kieran typically hung out in the factory.

“Hey. Need to be alone?” Vivi asked from the shadows, fixing her gaze on Kieran, who knew he wasn’t asleep though his back was to her as he rested on the mattress.

“...weird thing to ask as you change the status from ‘alone’ to ‘not alone’,” Kieran replied in a neutral tone, not turning to face her. He followed up with, “No.”

Vivi swallowed, more unsure about herself now. She remained silent. Maybe this was a bad idea. She went to turn away when Kieran rotated his body, studying her. Knowing her anxiety and awkwardness, and how his bluntness sometimes clashed, he said, "Viv. Stay. You can be sure of yourself around me. I do not need to be alone, it was an observation." (12)

"You're... not... angry or..." Viv whispered.

"No." He gave a smile, trying not to come across as cold. "I am currently accepting comfort but it is a limited time deal." Now, trying to make her smile. Viv pondered this, chuckled softly, and eventually came closer, sitting there next to him and staring at her lap.

"I am... here to talk. If you need," she said finally.

Kieran sighed. "My love is dead. Well. She is still alive. But I no longer love her."

"Oh," Viv said, trying to wrap her head around that.

"Do not worry, I will elaborate," Kieran said, letting out a sigh. This was difficult. He wasn't the best at sharing his feelings. After a moment, he delved into the situation in a somber tone, and finished off by saying, "...We changed. She could. But I feel nothing anymore (9)."

"I see. Maybe she will understand?"

"She will," Kieran said. "Irene was a wonderful person. I doubt that part of her has changed. Different paths happen in life. We were madly in love. Now, I am not. She will move on and accept that."

"That's good... but it still weighs really heavily on you, huh."

"Yes," Kieran admitted. "... If she survived the terrifying powers of one of the vampires I have yet to meet. And the gauntlet that is the City of Monsters. And was spared by Kami - something I have been reading up on lately...she can change. Become the person I fell in love with again. I am not giving her a chance. It ... bothers me."

"...I do not know," Kieran muttered. "I feel like a jackass."

“You are one,” Viv said, trying for humour and bumping him. This earned the slightest of smiles. Then, Viv grew serious. “Things change, Kieran. You informed her of the situation, and well. Sometimes people fall out of love. She has changed, but so have you. You’ve experienced undeath, been risen from the grave, and are now... something else. Like me. It... is daunting to realize, after having pushed it aside for years. But, here we are. That inherently changes us, too.”

“Yes,” Kieran muttered. “...And we know Ashkin are capable of love.”

“They are,” Viv said gently. “Some of the novels I read describe this. Sometimes it explodes into drama, but other times... things work out. With mature adults who aren’t inwardly squabbling teenagers, it typically does. I like to think you are the former.”

“I try,” Kieran said, rolling his eyes. “Using your trashy novels as an example is certainly a choice.”

“They are not trash,” Viv said defensively. “They—”

“That was a failed attempt at very dry humour, I know you enjoy your books, Viv. I admire you for being able to immerse yourself like that.”

“Oh. Really?” she asked, unsure if he was joking.

“Yes,” Kieran said. “You are just terrible at reading sarcasm.”

“No I’m not,” Viv said with a scoff. At Kieran’s light smile, she relaxed somewhat, though. “How can I help, Kieran?”

Giving her the side-eye, Kieran said, “Holden sent you down here because you were too anxious.”

“What makes you say that?!” Viv murmurs.

“And now that you know about my predicament, anything relating to a certain crush of yours is not something you are about to admit.”

Viv gulped, crossing her arms and now avoiding looking at him. “Certain... what did Holden say to you,” she said with a bit of venom. Damn that Ashkin!

“Nothing,” Kieran said. “You make it obvious.”

“No I don’t.”

“So you are not denying it then.”

“I—” Viv muttered. “Look, the focus here is on you, you have too much on your shoulders to worry about your comrades’ strange feelings right now.”

“Too shy to admit it, I need to grab you by the theoretical tail and drag you out. I can handle it, as the feeling is mutual.”

“It...” Viv squeaked. “Oh. Wait. Okay, what are we talking about.”

“Your crush. On me.”

“...”

Viv lapsed into a silence, her cheeks now suddenly a very clear blue. That’d been building, but now reached its peak. Patiently, Kieran waited, then said, “Need some time to process this?”

“...Yes.” (1) Viv gasped. “... You don’t...need this on your...”

“Oh for Garlemald’s sake,” Kieran muttered, suddenly leaning over and pulling Viv onto his lap, wrapping his arms around her. Her eyes remained closed as she shuddered, the feeling of being completely stunned and at this point totally out of it rushing through her. It was as if she got hit with some sort of disorientation spell.

Kieran continued. “What I am handling is difficult. But I need to move on as well. Miss Metal Flower and Commander Cedrick found love. Antonius possibly, that is the read I got as they walked by, but I did not want to make assumptions. Process it in my arms. Unless you want me to let you go. But in my case. I am fine. You being here is of big help. Even if you cannot admit the obvious.”

Viv manages to whisper, “...No. I do not need to be... let go, I’ll... okay...”



Kieran smiles. This is definitely helping. It's a touch mean, but given the adorable reaction of his comrade to them finally coming to an understanding that poor Holden had to... well, hold in, in both of their cases, it was worth it.

She could bitch at him later. When she could, well, think straight.

"Four oh' four, Vivi not found," Kieran comments in a tired but amused tone out loud.