

Journey's End



Sometimes, with a particular bit of nostalgic melancholy, Trazellie found herself retracing her steps from Ul'dah into Western Thanalan on foot, recounting the days of her youth and her foray into the Copperbell Mines. It felt like it had just been yesterday morning when Thubyrgeim of the Arcanist's Guild gave Trazellie a specialized grimoire and sent her out into the wide world, becoming somewhat of a protege for Baderon and Momodi both. From hand-me-down fishing rods to harnessing the errant aspected aether of the Primals themselves, Trazellie's growth from timid adventurer running from Ul'dah into a renowned warrior returning to Ul'dah to clear the mines of a great evil was something nobody could have predicted from the diminutive scholar-in-training. For the people that reminded her as a child like Momodi, it was the start of history in the making. A legendary tale; a tale of swords, spells, and souls...eternally retold. And perhaps, at one point, Trazellie had believed in that too, with an ego and confidence to match it. But as she walked down the same steps as her fiery-eyed younger self did in *The Eighty Sins of Sasamo*, a far more weary eyed Trazellie couldn't help but wonder if the adventure was the start of a condemnation; the beginning of the end of her days.

"Ah! Trazellie. How fare you as of late?"

Trazellie's dull grey eyes looked up from the ground she walked and into the visor of a brown skinned lalafellin Brass Blade, who bowed his head slightly to her presence. The voice snapped her attention back to reality as she found herself staring at the massive wooden gate of Scorpion's

Crossing, a sight that had remained surprisingly unchanged throughout the years. Even after all this time, it was quite unusual to Trazellie to see a Brass Blade act so cordially towards her in such an uptight place, let alone even attempt to start a conversation with anything other than a warning and a general disinterest to listen.

"Taking a bit of a walk," Trazellie responded kindly, smiling warmly towards the Brass Blade and trying her best to return the energy despite having none to spare. "A bit of moonlight does the mind good."

"Well, I would say be careful out there, but... I'm sure that's a fair bit redundant to say, especially to the Warrior of bleedin' Light!"

"Aye, like preaching to a choir. Thanks for thinkin' about me."

Trazellie gave a playful wink before continuing her walk, chuckling to herself as she heard the guard behind her stammer a farewell to her.

"A-Ah! Of course! Farewell!" The Brass Blade called out, before being chided by his Roegadyn coworker beside him.

"Keep it down, will ya? Don't wake up the bleedin' *birds*."

When the two Brass Blades were out of earshot, Trazellie's mind found itself wandering back to when she first set foot in Scorpion's Crossing with the same group of eager adventurers that followed her from Limsa and Gridania. The same lalafell was far less of an uncharismatic flirt, and was more of an uncharismatic ruffian. Someone who knew his status well and exerted authority, as most Brass Blades tended to do. The eyes of the merchants who now look at Trazellie more fondly and appreciatively once looked at her with derision and mockery, having far fewer praises for her "rugged equipment" than they had of Tataru's finely crafted clothes. As she wordlessly passed by them with only a half hearted wave to respond, her mind wandered again, returning to her solemn introspection.

How quick people are to change when it becomes convenient...

Before she knew it, she found herself already upon the bridge crossing over Nophica's Wells. She was already halfway to Copperbell, in the steps of the grinning younger self in what felt like half the time. Perhaps experience had simply hastened her steps, or perhaps she had simply lost her ability to find herself lost in the beauty of the world as her Arcanist self and her traveling Carbuncle once could. The thoughts creased a frown on Trazellie's face as she absorbed the silence of the moonlit night. With nothing but her thoughts to keep her company, she placed one step in front of the other, listening intently to the sound of rushing water beneath her as she crossed the bridge into Horizon's Edge. There stood a fork in the road that she became all too familiar with in her youth; to the right was her destination, the entrance to Copperbell Mines, a once voidsent and vilekin infested hellsite that slowly turned into a working mine once more.

However, to the left stood something that she couldn't help but reminisce as she stared upon it: the white stone gates of the quaint trade hub of Horizon.

Trazellie took a step towards the gate as she peered upwards at the size of it all, the area slowly became woefully familiar as she peered inside the hub and gazed at the Aetheryte. Behind it laid the route to the Footfalls, a place that she had an abundance of time learning and memorizing as she constantly traveled to and from the Waking Sands, usually at the request of Minfilia and the Scions. Trazellie couldn't help but give a wry chuckle as the familiar face of her blond haired leader bleed into her memories. For all the pain that came from being with the Scions, and for how much of a pain in the arse it was to get to the Waking Sands, it also was the first place Trazellie felt like she truly belonged. A place where she would meet the group of friends she could truly call her own. With the chill of nostalgia creeping up on her arms and back, she tilted her head towards the moon, letting the light of the celestial bodies touch her face as she closed her eyes.

"How would things have changed if you were still here?" Trazellie asked the stars above, expecting only silence to return. "Would you have had my position? And would I, yours? What more would I have done to see you here. What more I would have done to make you proud."

But silence was not what returned to her, and instead the distant cries of a distressed baby shattered the meditative silence that blanketed Trazellie. The sound ripped Trazellie from her trance, and with a sigh, she gazed around the city to see what had been the commotion. To her surprise, however, not a single soul was in sight. Not near the aetheryte nor in the doorway of

any building, the sound had instead come from behind her, out towards the wilderness. She snapped her head around in confusion and listened to the sound again, which had grown louder and more anxious by the second.

This isn't right. Someone's in trouble.

Trazellie grit her teeth as she sprinted in the direction of the sound, her eyes quickly surveying the area that surrounded her. Her chest tightened in anticipation as the voice grew closer and closer with no parental figure in sight. Had the vilekin torn up the parents? Had the baby crawled out of Horizon? Several questions with no answers flooded her mind as the crying baby's pleas grew closer and closer until it was practically next to her ear. She took another frenzied look around the general area. No vilekin around, not even the Sun Midges that tended to swarm around. No corpses, no Brass Blades out on the scene. The only thing that surrounded her was foliage and bushes that towered over her, much to chagrin. The voice cried out once again, and there she found the source.

Within the brambles and briars of the area surrounding the entrance of Horizon laid a brown skinned Miqo'te baby wrapped in a dirty white cloth that was now coming loose, no doubt from the baby's repeated attempts to break free. A rather unpleasant scent filled the air with it, no doubt also coming from the baby and its lack of care. A myriad of obvious, yet unanswered questions came to mind, but fell to the wayside as Trazellie picked up the fussing baby and took several breaths to calm her nerves. She knew one ultimate truth and the only one that mattered at the moment: she needed to get Ul'dah, and get there *fast*.

Taking a step back from the baby, Trazellie pulled out a faint indigo stone from a small pouch tied at her waist. She muttered a quick incantation, a golden glow crackled from fingertips that eventually gave way to a golden bolt of lightning that struck the ground in front of her. From the sparks rose a familiar dog whose fleece was as golden as the summer sun and flowed like the wind itself. Upon forming and breathing in the air around it, the dog's eyes locked onto Trazellie and began to pant excitedly at her, as if it were a friend reunited at long last. His excitement, however, was cut short by the shrill cries of the baby, to which he immediately lowered his head in worried confusion as Trazellie picked the odorous baby from the bushes and wrapped her arms around it.

"Argos, we need to get to Ul'dah, and *fast*. Can you do that for me?" Trazellie asked the dog in a collected but still anxious tone, to which the dog barked in acknowledgment and lowered itself for Trazellie to climb upon. She let out a sigh of relief and rubbed her face against his golden coat in appreciation as she tried her best to get the baby's blanket back around him.

"Good boy... I promise we will get time to play later." She breathed, trying her best to hold onto the baby as Argos yipped in response, as if to say "You better!" and taking off. He took care to fly swiftly but steadily, allowing stability for Trazellie to try to calm the baby down as they soared above the desert Piestes below and rock formations below. Tried as she might, the baby simply wouldn't calm down, and the stench of neglect and lack of hygiene only grew far worse as time went down, no doubt spreading its way onto Trazellie's clothes as a result. Feeling Trazellie's panic begin to set in, Argos barked seemingly in reassurance he cleared the mountains

and flew above the Eighty Sins of Sasamo. When Trazellie looked up from the baby and found herself in the entrance of the Steps of Nald, Trazellie practically shouted in relief as she jumped off the dog and bowed to it, much to the chagrin of the now troubled Brass Blades that stood by the gate.

"Thanks, Argos! I owe you!" Trazellie shouted, hopping off the dog with the baby and beginning a full sprint down the Steps of Nald despite the protests of Mimishu behind her. Argos yipped once more before flying off in a direction Trazellie didn't see, leaving her to tend to the baby who continued to cry his little heart out. She didn't know first thing on what the baby could have possibly needed or how to take care of him, but she figured that if anybody in Ul'dah would know where to start, it would more than likely be within the Steps of Thal, in the marketplace. Her heart raced in trepidation as she racked her mind with questions about the baby, hoping that somebody-or anybody-would bring answers and help the baby (and by extension, her ears) peace.

"SOMEBODY! ANYBODY! PLEASE HELP ME!" Trazellie screamed into the night as she ran, cradling the baby close to her as she kept her stride.

"THIS BABY NEEDS HELP! SOMEONE GET A DOCTOR! PLEASE!"

The sound of a lalafell woman screaming, never mind the fact that it was the *realm famous Warrior of Light*screaming, brought curious, prying eyes out from all over Ul'dah as she ran through the streets with the baby and his incredible stamina screaming in her wake. Whispers

spread quickly, and Trazellie allowed no time for respite as she ran into the marketplace to begin asking the first people she saw for help.

"IS THERE A DOCTOR NEARBY? PLEASE! THIS BABY NEEDS HELP!" Trazellie shouted, bringing all eyes upon her as she ran up to one of the merchants in a frantic trance.

"Fridurih, please. Do you have anything I can use to help this child? L-Like milk, some cloth? I'll pay whatever it takes. I need help, and fast."

The merchant nodded hesitantly, and with the help of a Potwatch merchant near by, the two were able to make a makeshift change of clothes for the baby and throw out the old wrap, a far less "pretty" situation but had been far more hygienic than the old wrap, which had been caked with mud and bodily refuse. Others began to crowd around as Trazellie moved to help feed the baby, starting with small bits of crushed apple that he initially rejected, but slowly accepted as the hunger began to set in. She breathed a sigh of relief when the baby began to weakly eat the mashed apples and drink the milk given to him by Fridurih and Katherine the Potwatch merchant, who were just as relieved to see the baby begin to calm down.

"Ah, thank the *gods* for you two. Thank you so much..." Trazellie breathed, trying to catch her breath as she gave an appreciative thumbs up to the two before reaching for her wallet in the satchel at her side.

"H-How much do I owe you? Name your price, I'll pay it, no matter what."

"Nonsense... I am full glad jus't'see the lad calm hisself." Fridurih laughed heartily, looking at the baby and Katherine, who had lightly patted the baby's head to comfort the child. "'Sides, it ain't erry' day that the Warrior of Light erself comes by now, issit? Specially when she's screamin like hell isself broke loose!"

"...Uh, yeah, I suppose not, huh?" Trazellie grumbled, her face turning beet red in embarrassment. "I, um, panicked. Sorry."

"Now now, you did a good thing today, dear," Katherine voiced, keeping the baby in her arms as he began gnawing a piece of lettuce with a grumpy expression. He clearly was not enjoying the food, but his hunger didn't allow for much.

"But it does bring up a few questions... Where did you find him? Where's his parents?"

Katherine's questions twisted Trazellie's face in confusion, as she had a strong answer for the first, but not the second question.

"Near Horizon. Past the bridge. His parents... I don't know. I-I thought they might have been killed, but I didn't see a body. They were just...gone. He was in a bunch of bushes when I found him."

The answer was shocking to both Fridurih and Katherine, but before they could respond, a group of Brass Blades intruded onto the scene, pushing away various bystanders and dispersing the crowd with warnings as their eyes trained upon Trazellie. Among them was the lalafellin Brass Blade that rested at the front of the Steps of Nald.

"Mimishu. This is the woman?"

"Yessir. I'm sure of it."

Trazellie looked up at the Brass Blades and groaned loudly in frustration at the group. She always hated dealing with these pricks.

"What? Not getting paid enough by your employers, so you gotta go after me?"

"Our *employers* pay us to protect the order in Thanalan, and you running around screaming like a madwoman with a baby in your arms is very much the opposite."

"Bugger off, willye? She's the Warrior o' Light, and she just saved this wee lad. Found 'im ou'side of Horizon, she says." Fridurih spoke up, crossing his arms with a scoff as the Brass Blades merely crossed their arms with unmoving obstinance.

"Be that as it may, there are *rules and laws* to abide by here in Ul'dah, and flying past security on a *dog* and then running through the city at the dead of night screaming with a now admitted *smuggled* child... Why, I wonder what your parents would have to think?"

"Interesting. I wasn't aware that the Syndicate paid petty sellswords to study Ul'dahn law."

Out from behind the group of Brass Blades stepped forward a tall Hellsguard Roegadyn with a red skinned Xaela Au Ra in tow, clad in the uniform of the Immortal Flames. The Brass Blades turned towards the two and froze in place, taking a staggered step back.

"Tch. The dogs of the Sultana. Immortal Flames."

"That's right," The Au Ra scoffed, flicking her wrists at the group. "So you lot can piss off now. Leave these honest folk be. The only crime I'm seeing here are you scumbags. Get lost."

The Brass Blades looked at each other and shook their heads in disgust, deciding to clear from the scene as the Roegadyn and the Xaela watched them with a scowl. The Roegadyn in particular let out an exasperated sigh as he looked over at Trazellie, who looked like she was ready to gut one of the Blades in particular.

"Ever the troublemaker, aren't you?"

"Lay off, Tough. I'm not in the mood. I've had a long night."

The Au Ra, who had been trying her best to survey the scene, let out a small laugh at Trazellie's quip.

"Clearly. Didn't realize that someone so short could scream so loud."

"Can we save the mummery for later, Cyldhi? Help me find a doctor first, before I *really* find a reason to start screaming."

"Alright, alright. That's why Tough and I went looking for you to begin with. Doesn't take long for news of the Warrior of Light having a near mental breakdown to spread around."

Trazellie groaned in annoyance, feeling the anger flush to her face.

"I forgot. The only thing looser in this city than one's change are another's lips. Color me shocked."

"Well, it was those "loose lips" that helped us get here before something ugly happened, so don't count your blessings."

Tough Sun's quip of his own caught Trazellie off guard, but she eventually just crossed her arms and nodded in response.

"...right. Well, thank Fridurih and Katherine here. They're the ones who helped me. Helped the baby far better than I ever could."

"Enough of that, now. If you had not discovered him by chance, the wilderness more than likely would have. And there would have been a far different outcome. You know that."

Trazellie kept quiet as Tough Sun picked up the baby, who let out a concerned whine as he kept the Miquo'te infant close to his chest and motioned to Cyldhi.

"Take Trazellie down to the infirmary and call for a surgeon. I'll follow anon, once I ask questions and obtain a few more supplies. I'll see to it that Fridurih and Katherine are personally compensated for their expenses."

Cyldhi nodded compliantly, gesturing to Trazellie before turning her gaze over to the Pearl Lane.

"On it. Let's go, squirt. No sense standing around here. With any luck, maybe Eo or Leonidas might catch you when you don't smell like someone else's piss and shit."

Trazellie didn't even bother trying to come up with a quip to respond with for Cyldhi. She looked at Fridurih and Katherine and bowed in gratitude towards them, to which they responded in kind.

"Don't worry, Trazellie. We'll come up with something. We won't let those Brass Blades get away with it. Go take a load off." Katherine reassured, turning her attention back towards the baby and Tough as Fridurih laughed.

"Yer ladyfriend is right. Get yerself some fresh linens! The smell o' shite ain't fittin for a hero such as yerself."



Trazellie lost track of time as she sat in the infirmary wordlessly, her fingers clasped together as her eyes drilled patterns into the floor in anticipation. Not even washing up and changing clothes calmed her nerves, her mind was too focused on what would become of the baby to have any rest. She changed out of her usual red flowing yukata, as Cyldhi and Fredurih were correct; she reeked of the urine and fecal matter from the baby. Being free from the scent helped clear the headache, and the far more casual pair of gray adventurer clothes that Tataru made for her in what seemed like ages ago was a familiar comfort, but her worries held dominion over her brain that the silence made louder. When the door to the infirmary she rested in opened, Trazellie almost immediately exploded out of her seat, forcing herself up and bracing herself for whatever came next, only to sign in anxiety when it was revealed it had only been Cyldhi entering the room.

"Don't sound too excited, damn." Cyldhi mused, handing a Trazellie a plate that rested a single large burrito upon it. "Figured that with all the pacing you're doing, you'd burn a hole in your stomach big enough to fit one of my homemade burritos in it."

Trazellie opened her mouth to protest, but the growling of her stomach answered for her. She pouted and took the plate gently and set it down on her lap as she sat back down in her seat, almost immediately shoving half of the burrito into her mouth and biting into it with a ferocious fervor. Cyldhi nodded her head and smirked in delight, taking that as a nonverbal victory over Trazellie for the night before sitting next to the ravenous lalafell and taking a deep breath.

"Well, if it's of any consolation, the baby is fine. Turns out, the Immortal Flames are a bit more qualified at dealing with loud screaming Miquo'te babies than I expected!" Cyldhi mused, trying to pad out the next bit of news carefully. "The bad news? Well..."

Trazellie practically spat out her barely chewed burrito onto the plate at the "Well" in Cyldhi's sentence.

"...Well, *what*, Cyldhi??"

"It won't be forever. The Immortal Flames Company isn't the best place to raise a baby. The kid's gonna have to get a home."

"Uh, yeah. I'd sure hope so. What exactly is the problem there?"

"Well-"

"I'm afraid it is not as simple as that, Trazellie."

Tough Sun's voice instantly perked up Cyldhi and Trazellie's attention, with Cyldhi standing straight up and nodding her head in acknowledgement. Trazellie set the plate on the now empty seat and raised an eyebrow in confusion.

"I don't follow."

"Given that the baby seems to be in good health and at least two seasons old, we suspect that he may have been deposited there intentionally. Because of that, the parents are unknown, and it is unlikely we'll ever find them. There is too little to go off of to warrant a search, and even if it were approved, the baby having no traceable lineage here in Ul'dah and being found near Horizon officially places this out of Ul'dahn hands."

Trazellie grit her teeth bitterly at the news. Her brain told her it was perfectly logical, and yet her heart ached all the same for the child.

"Couldn't he belong to one of the Seeker of the Sun tribes? Can't we ask them??"

The question brought out an exasperated scoff out of Cyldhi, who shook her head at the notion.

"No offense Traz, but that's an absolutely stupid idea. A *terrible* social misstep besides, nobody is going to simply admit to throwing their kid out to the vilekin. And that's even if they'll even take us casting the accusation lightly. No witness means not even a shred of a lead to go off of. The kid practically doesn't exist at all."

"So then what's the big deal? Just find the damn kid a home, then."

Cyldhi and Tough Sun shared a weary look with one another, slightly frustrated with Trazellie's surprisingly belligerent ignorance of the gravity of the situation. Tough Sun took a knee in front of Trazellie and stared deep into her gray eyes as he took a heavy, concentrated breath.

"Trazellie. Listen to me, and listen well. It isn't as easy as simply "just find a home." You of all people have seen how orphans and outsiders are treated in Ul'dah. Regrettably, even with the Immortal Flames and the Sultana doing all we can to re-educate, its culture of ignorance and greed runs deep. As much as we terribly wish it wasn't so, the child is simply not safe here. Limsa and Gridania hardly fare any better. And the rest of the world would be too far of a journey for the child to be exposed to at this age. You deduced that the baby would not be able to handle any displacement spells just as well as I did. It's why you summoned a familiar to ride him here, correct? This limits our options severely, and I'm afraid it is something that we simply cannot handle long term."

Tears threatened to tear themselves out of Trazellie's eyes at his words, so she squeezed them shut and hung her head low wordlessly. Tough looked up at Cyldhi with a frown, unhappy at the pain Trazellie was feeling but feeling no other option to take. Cyldhi responded in kind with a solemn nod, shifting the weight from one foot onto the next as she continued Tough's train of thought.

"Traz. The reality is... nobody is going to want to just take some baby found out in the wilderness. Not when we're only just recovering from everything that happened. Best case scenario? The kid gets shuffled between wet nurses. Then gets shuffled out into the streets when he's old enough. And then...he either sinks or swims. He either finds his footing, finds a family, or finds a grave to lie in. And I know you're not one for leaving things to fate and chance."

Silence filled the space between the three as Trazellie found herself unable to speak without her voice ripping itself apart. Tough and Cyldhi took this as a solemn defeat, a reality that simply could not be avoided, even if it was something they themselves wished otherwise. Tough cleared his throat and stood himself back up, placing two of his fingers on top of Trazellie's head as a comforting gesture.

"I can promise one thing: for the brief time we hold care of the child, we'll take the necessary steps to ensure the safety of the child. And if you wish to see the child, I can personally-"

"I'll raise the damn kid myself then."

Silence filled the room again, this time in awe of the abrupt audacity of Trazellie's statement.

"...Trazellie, be reasonable." Tough Sun warned, raising his hand from Trazellie as she glared up at him with teary eyes. "You are a woman most capable of anything you put your mind to. But a raising a child is-

"What other choice is there? If I don't do it, nobody else will."

"Let me finish, Trazellie. Please. I am not doubting your capabilities. But I am doubting your understanding of the gravity of this claim. This is not a beast to be felled. It is a life to be nurtured. Your mental state has been in notable decline. Your retirement was made as a direct result of this. If you cannot find your own worth and view this as an obligation, then this will only damage it further, and your life-along with his own-will only know turmoil."

Trazellie hopped off the chair with a growl as she curled her hands into fists, gritting her teeth fervently as Tough Sun's words dug deep into her again.

"What difference does it make then, Tough? At this point, I'm feeling like letting the kid get swallowed whole by a Pieste would have been the best option for everyone. I'm just getting chided for making the choice I felt was right. Again and again. Everything I do is somehow wrong. So if I keep making mistakes now, and the kid is destined to have a troublesome life, then I'll just keep making mistakes later, right? By your own logic, this is the least screwed up path

for him!" Trazellie practically shouted, warranting an annoyed groan out of Cyldhi as crossed her arms at the angry lalafell.

"Gods *dammit Trazellie*, if that's all you're going to choose to take out of this, then you *really are* being ignorant here. By a very wide, *very disappointing* margin," Cyldhi snapped, poking Trazellie's chest harsh enough to stagger her back. "Pull your head out and listen, kid. I don't think there's a single person in this company that believes in you more than Tough and I, but that's the problem: this company includes you too. This kid won't be your absolution. You have to find that yourself, and if you raise that kid thinking he'll help you reach it, you and the kid both are in a world of hurt. All we're saying is to think about what all this entails. Don't make this kid some sort of trial for yourself to overcome. Treat him as someone you could genuinely call your own. Please."

Trazellie found herself yet again with the inability to speak, lest her throat tear itself apart with her tears. Her thoughts ran rampant with the voices of Tough and Cyldhi, their words bouncing around her brain without end.

This kid won't be your absolution.

That's what this always was about, wasn't it...?

This is not a beast to be felled.

Is that...all that I can view things as?

Don't make this kid some sort of trial for yourself to overcome.

"Without due diligence on the paperwork, the trial that needs overcoming first and foremost is the act of legal documentation."

The sound of a familiar deep voice and the door to the infirmary opening captured the attention of the three Immortal Flame members almost immediately. Two older lalafells stepped into the room and locked eyes onto Trazellie, and behind them shortly followed a tall black haired Miqu'te with a single red eye that complimented his white one. Trazellie recognized their faces almost immediately, causing to turn herself around in embarrassment as the Miqu'te let out a sigh.

"These two were askin' around for their daughter at the front office. Pretty damn insistent about it." The Miqu'te shrugged, looking down at Ederi and Memena as they quickly surrounded Trazellie. They didn't seem to pay attention to anything else except their daughter, so Tough gestured towards Cyldhi as he took a step towards the door.

"I suppose it is natural for her parents to be concerned, considering the reports. Thank you, Leonidas. I take it that the baby is hale and whole?"

"Little man quit yapping, if that's what you mean. I think he likes me."

"I see. Well then. It is about time Cyldhi and I gave space to Trazellie anyways. Thank you for leading her parents to us. It was very considerate of you, given protocols."

"Eh. I just wanted them out of the way, personally."

Between Tough giving Leonidas admonishment for his curt commentary and Leonidas being nonchalant about the whole affair, Cyldhi bowed her head slightly to Trazellie before making her leave as well, something that Trazellie opened her mouth to protest against but couldn't find the words yet again.

"Cyl, wait." Trazellie murmured weakly, but Cyldhi couldn't hear it as she began to shut the door behind her.

"Sleep on it for a bit, Traz. Think about it. We'll see you around."

With a click of the door, silence filled the room yet again, much to Trazellie's ire.

Memena and Ederi looked at each other with concern in their eyes when the silent realization that their daughter wasn't keen on responding to them dawned on the couple. The alienating feeling of not understanding their daughter returned to them, a product of the time spent separated from another; a result of their previous missteps. However, just as Trazellie was keen

on never stepping down, Ederi and Memena were keen on never allowing Trazellie to walk her path alone in life, even if it was far too late to mend the bridges.

"If it is of any consolation, dear... Your father and I are confident that we can get the paperwork arranged for the child. For once... our chosen path can yet right the wrongs that plague Ul'dah. Even if it is just a single life."

Trazellie grit her teeth at the mere mention of the Monetarists, cursing their name under her breath.

"I'm *so glad* we could get the issue of taxation over and done with before the poor bastard even has a home. Tch. Bastard monetarists." Trazellie remarked sarcastically, her words digging sharply into her parents, but they remained stalwart in their support.

"Be that as it may, it helps us get this child one step closer to one."

"It may be a trial, but we know your heart is set on this."

The words of her parents, despite how distant the three of them became to each other, were immensely comforting in a way that brought the tears out Trazellie's once again.

"Not sure...what good any of that will do... I'm not fit to be a good...well, *anything.* Not a mother, nor a warrior. I'm just somebody who always falls short."

"To that child, you were the only one who didn't give up on him. When he grows up, he will see you as both, not one or the other."

Whatever composure Trazellie had was broken when her father spoke up.

"Then...why....? Why do I feel so bad?" Trazellie sobbed, bringing a wry smile to her mother's face as she hugged her daughter tightly.

"Because sometimes, you confuse your shortcomings as indictments of failure. Something we all share. If your friends thought you'd fail, they wouldn't have tried to make you see otherwise."

I don't think there's a single person in this company that believes in you more than Tough and I.

Suddenly, Cyldhi and Tough's words stung that much sharper in her heart.

"Your mother and I... Tataru and the others... We can only show you the door, you just have to have the strength to walk through it. You might think that you're painting with a dreamer's brush, but if we all genuinely believed you couldn't do it, we wouldn't be here with you helping you take those steps."

Trazellie didn't have an argument against it, because in the end, she knew it to be true. Cyldhi and Tough Sun were bound by no code or edict to help her with this child. They did so because they believed in her. Leonidas could have well and truly left the situation alone, but something else compelled him to bring her parents into this room. The three of them all, in some way, believed in her abilities. The only one who didn't was herself.

"I just...want to help people... I want to be the best I can..."

The memories of the crying baby resurfaced in her brain, along with the memories of all the children she met as a child and couldn't save. What she wouldn't give to turn back the hands of time and help them now. The wrongs she spent her waking days trying to right, now resting in the room next to her.

"I can't...let him suffer... I have to help him... I have to..."

"Then let your father and I help you, Trazellie. Just this once."

Her mother's embrace only tightened further as another pair of hands rested upon her back.

"Give yourself some time to think. Talk to Tataru about it. I'm sure she would want to know you're signing on for this."

The name shocked Trazellie to the core, as she remembered the face of the one she could truly say understood and loved her. A face she promised never to forget, pushed to the wayside in the wake of this child and his survival.

Tataru... I never even thought to...

"You...have to understand the risks, however. She might not fully agree to this. She does have dreams of her own too, you know."

I never even considered her...

"If it comes down to it... would you be able to make the choice, Trazellie?"

The choice between Tataru...or the child?

"Trazellie, dear...?"

Trazellie thought long and hard about the answer, should it ever come to it. And despite how initially terrifying the presence was, the answer came naturally to her...almost instinctively.

She couldn't give up on the child. Even if it meant having to say goodbye to Tataru. As painful as the idea felt, her parents were right. She had a dream of her own; her own vision. She no longer required Trazellie's help, and as painful as the idea of letting her go was, the baby stood out to

her in mind front in center of it all... along with one ultimate truth: the baby had yet to be able to reach that same conclusion.

"...I could. Mom and Dad. I could. And I want the child. I want to protect him. I won't let him suffer. That...that's my decision."

For the first time in her life, she saw tears flow from the eyes of her parents, and for the first time, she felt truly connected with them again as they all silently cried with one another.

"...then the child is in good hands. See, Ederi? Our daughter...is all grown up now."

"I know. And I couldn't be any prouder."



A day later, after the chaos in Ul'dah unfolded, Trazellie found herself sitting at the edge of her bed in her apartment, her head still spinning. All the rest in the world still wasn't enough to rid herself of the emotional fatigue, and even though the sun hung well into the noontime, Trazellie could barely rip herself from the bed to face the day in front of her.

She does have dreams of her own too, you know.

If it comes down to it, would you be able to make the choice?

For once, the thought of Tataru's face pained Trazellie. The truth is, she had no idea how Tataru would react. This all could be one mass exaggeration filled with dread, as it all tended to be, but on the other, it could also very well be the turning point for the two of them, this time, in separate directions from one another. Tataru always had her head in the future, and just settling down was already a radical shift she had to account for. Another mouth to feed could very well be a step too far, and the reality is, it could very well be two dreams that were incompatible before long. And the idea of saying goodbye to it made her heart ache, even when she realized that it could be the best step going forward.

"...Trazellie? You there?"

Trazellie barely heard the knock on the door between her thoughts, and it was only when the door slowly clicked open that her attention towards the black haired figure that stepped inside.

"...Nora?" Trazellie asked slowly, adjusting herself on the bed as the lithe Miqu'te set foot inside the cluttered apartment, whistling in amusement as she saw the state in disarray the place had been.

"Rough night?" She asked simply, looking over to Trazellie, who shook her head weakly in response.

"The room has always looked like this. Sorry for not cleaning up."

Trazellie plopped herself off of the bed and walked over to the mirror next to her dresser, frowning as she looked at her messy set of bed hair and tugged on it, nearly forgetting Nora's presence. Nora simply shrugged in response.

"Eh. I've seen worse. 'Sides, it's not my place to judge." Nora shrugged, absentmindedly picking up some stray pieces of paper off of the floor and placing them onto the desk topped with various other indiscriminately sorted documents. At the sight of this, Trazellie stopped fiddling with her hair and turned over to Nora in surprise.

"You don't have to clean up after me. I'm fully capable of doing that."

"Not if you're sleeping the day like you had a break up. Tough told me all about it. Said you looked absolutely gutted."

Trazellie winced at the idea. She wasn't even sure if it **was** a breakup just yet, and she already looked broken to the eyes of others.

"...Not quite, Nora. Close, but not quite."

Nora's ears perked in confusion at the idea. The idea of the two lalafells having any sort of altercation was not only surprising, but in a way, deeply unsettling.

"Trouble in paradise? Here I thought that you two were practically conjoined."

"...If you had to make the choice between someone you loved and saving someone's life, what would you choose?"

The question practically slapped Nora across the face. Not only was it very...un-Trazellie like, it was also just a fairly abrupt question in its own right. She scratched her head as the silver haired lalafell in front of her stared emptily in the mirror again, seemingly unhappy with her reflection.

"...What are you going on about, Trazellie? *What happened?*"

Trazellie couldn't tell if it was a relief or an annoyance that Nora wasn't clued in about what happened last night. She sighed in relief all the same, because perhaps she at least could see Trazellie's side first.

"It's just....I found a child last night. A kid with no home. And if I don't, then..."

"...And she gave you that choice herself??"

"...No, she didn't. But, I-"

Nora crossed her arms and huffed impatiently at the Lalafell. She knew Trazellie to be impulsive and irrational, but a doomed pessimist was a new one. And she was far from a fan of her current demeanor.

"So then who's making the choice? It speaks a lot more about you than it does her if you're thinking that she's just going to bail out cuz you chose to raise a kid."

The statement made Trazellie's blood run cold. It was brutal, but it was honest. It made her stop in her tracks. She was right. Did she truly believe Tataru to be so harsh and calculating, even after all this time?

"Nora, that's..."

"Look, I'm no counselor, and hell, I only came here to check in and drag your sorry ass out of bed, but I can tell you this, Trazellie: you have **got** to stop thinking that everything you do is at the cost of something else."

The statement jolted Trazellie awake, catching her off guard. It seemed like the admonishment was far from over, and given the person speaking, it was about to get a whole lot worse.

"What do you mean...? I'm just... trying to find my way I guess. And that way may not be what Tataru finds compatible with her own dreams."

Nora scoffed at the remark.

"Did you ask? Or did you sit and think yourself into a stupor? You don't *have* to lose something every time you start something new, you know? Life is not always give and take. Besides, even if you did, and even if it did shake out like that... Try looking around you for once, instead of up your own ass. Do you think any of us are here on condition? You don't owe us anything, nor do we to you. If I've got to beat your ass to get your head screwed on straight, I'm doing it because I *want* to. And at the rate you're going, I might just *have* to!"

Nora's aggression was certainly an eyeopener, and yet, it brought a smile to Trazellie's face and brought a small laugh from her. In the only way Nora could, she got Trazellie to see things in a different light, even if she had to knock sense into her to do it.

"Ha... Well, hopefully you won't have to..." Trazellie chuckled, brushing the hair out of her eyes and turning over to Nora, who still kept her arms crossed at Trazellie.

"Get your ass out of bed, then. And put a smile on your face. Cyldhi wanted to go shopping with Tough and I to get a gift for Aymeric, and considering your mopey ass, I figured I could bring you along too. Maybe you can get Tataru a housewarming gift. Maybe even find an outfit for the kid."

An outfit for the baby boy...

The thought brought a warmth to her chest, and for once, the anxiety melted into hope.

"...I still have to think of a name, admittedly."

"Then get your ass on it, then! You're off to a lousy start already!"



A day of debauchery and perhaps irresponsible coping purchases later, night fell upon Eorzea again, and before long, Trazellie found herself standing on the docks of Shirogane, yet again underneath the pale moonlight. She never really considered herself a night owl by nature, tending to prefer the warmth of the daylight on her skin in her youth. But as the years went on, she yearned more and more for the silence and stillness of the night, often reuniting with the moon and finding herself enraptured by its glow. The hush of the waves kept her tethered to her spot on the docks, the song of the sea gently pulling her into a sense of ease as her eyelids grew heavier. The combined aggression of Nora and Cyldhi buried with Tough's penchant of uprooting her from the ground left a toll on her energy reserves, most of which were lost from the laughter and smiles they shared. For once, it was good to be out of the house, and even worse, if it felt nice to be teased and tormented for once.

"...Have I always been like this? Been so flippant and complacent?" Trazellie asked aloud, to a crowd of none. "Heh. I really have been a handful, then. I had no idea..."

She walked slowly across the red colored wood bridge and stepped into the cobblestone street leading towards her apartment. But for once, she turned her sights not towards the buildings before her, but instead towards the beige sands that stretched out to the endless sea at her left. With the seaside gales being her only reply, she slipped off her geta and set foot on the beach, feeling the cool sand beneath embrace her feet. She smiled softly as she found herself absorbed in the feeling, remembering the days in her youth where she and her retainers would kick around the defective sandbags in Ul'dah. Such a troublesome time for her, and yet, like everything else that came after, the joy found was made in the company of friends, and never on her own. And yet... the lesson seemed ever so elusive, floating just so ever out of reach. She felled gods, turned the tides of wars, liberated entire countries... and yet, she never could learn to get over herself. Trazellie couldn't help but laugh at the irony of it all.

"How did you guys manage?" Trazellie asked the stars yet again, kicking up the sand and walking along the edge of the beach. She shivered when the water slithered up the shore and dashed over her feet, as if to gently guide her back to the land. She stopped to let the water wash over her legs again and again, listening yet again to the sea's reply.

"...If things had been different, if you had my position... Would I have yours? Would I still be as I am? Or would I guide you? Just as you guided me?"

Trazellie sighed and walked over to the lone gazebo that housed a solitary crimson lantern, offering a warm glow in the blue melancholy of the night. For once, she yearned for Nora and Cyldhi's insults again. She yearned for Tough and Leonidas making jokes about her height. It felt lonely without them, and the confusion that these sudden admissions brought made Trazellie's heart drop. For all the grief she gave them, they were truly her friends through everything that stood before her, and without them... well, there might very well not have been a sea to speak to. And now, in the silence of the night, she yearned for them to come back to tease her again, all alone. Or so she thought.

Though she couldn't see them, she felt the presence of a figure lean against one of the wood support pillars to her right, hiding within the darkness of the night. Feeling an intense gaze by a familiar Au Ra, Trazellie leaned back and took a deep breath. Her presence was unmistakable, and yet, Trazellie chose not to acknowledge it, merely smiling only in the warmth of her icy gaze. The silence spoke louder than anything, and if it meant holding onto her for just a while longer, she would choose to pretend for as long as it would take.

Minutes passed, feeling almost like a silent eternity crawled between the two of them. Trazellie counted the waves that crashed against the rocks, finding just about any excuse possible to keep the figure close to her, fearing the eventual division words would bring. Such a fate was unavoidable, as eventually, one of the two would break the silence, even if Trazellie didn't wish it so.

"...Have you come to your senses yet?"

"Enough for the kid's sake, at least."

Silence fell between the two as a small exhale sounded from the hidden voice. Trazellie kept her eyes trained on the moon as it looked down at the two, the tears in her eyes obfuscating the fabric of the night before her.

"...Huh. Shame about the weather. It's a bad night for clouds, Eo."

Eodumia looked up at the stars above, in a sky free of the obfuscating wisps that hid the celestial bodies from those below. Another silent exhale escaped her.

"...So it is."

Trazellie chuckled again as she wiped her eyes with her sleeves, feeling the presence of Eodumia shift from her right towards her back. She didn't dare look back at the auri woman, lest she reveal her watering eyes before her. Just once, she wanted to look strong in front of her, though she suspected her charade was long since seen through.

"...to what do I owe the pleasure of this night, Eo?"

Trazellie asked half heartedly, expecting an equally as half hearted response, but instead, she merely felt a light touch on her back, listening to the sound of Eodumia sitting down and placing

her back against hers. More silence fell between the two, and to Trazellie, that was the only response she needed. She knew she couldn't have fooled Eodumia further, nobody ever could. She knew by now that the infamous crybaby of the Scions couldn't escape the watchful eyes of the Auri Assassin, so she did what she was known for amongst her friends far wide.

She laughed until her voice broke, and then began crying yet again.

"Hah. I guess... I did ask for you, didn't I...?"

"And now you have your answer. This time, pay attention to it."

There was the quip she was waiting for. A smile returned to Trazellie's face as the night blurred into a mess of colors in front of her.

"...Don't worry. I... I have been. Heh. I-I suspect you wouldn't be here... i-if you thought I wasn't."

Eodumia hummed to herself in thought as she turned her head slightly towards Trazellie's voice.

"You already know the answer. It's always been there."

Silence fell between the two yet again between Trazellie's sniffles and sobs, and indeed, the answer rested right behind the two of them. Trazellie forced herself through a fit of awkward and

pained laughter in an effort to cheer herself up, something she was sure sounded (and appeared to be) quite discordant. She never was a particularly glamorous crier, but she also never made the mistake of ever believing she was one. And yet, miraculously, it was something that never drove anyone away from her. Perhaps, if anything, it was what helped reunite them when times were at their worst: a reminder of somebody to protect, a reminder to keep smiling no matter the odds. She couldn't say for sure, but Eodumia's presence here with her, especially in the state she was in and with how reclusive Eodumia was renowned to be, meant one thing for sure:

People **believed** in her. And with that, Trazellie felt the light flare in her eyes again.

"I'm serious about that child, Eo. I am not giving up on him. I can't."

Seeing the light from Trazellie's eyes stab into the night brought a relieved smirk to Eodumia's shrouded face.

"...It's about time. I'll admit. I'm still not entirely sure looking after a kid is something that's in your wheelhouse. Not with your volatile tendencies. That being said..."

Eo turned herself around and sat next to Trazellie, looking up at the same moon as her friend did.

"...You didn't give up on the child, as most others have. That alone will mean the world to him. Eventually."

"You're right. And I won't. Even if I have to be the only one to do it. I'm not letting Ul'dah trample another kid. I'm not letting him suffer again. To wash my hands of a life, only to place it in the hands of someone else... That's not wisdom. That's indolence."

"...Spoken like a true Leveilleur. My, the twins really have rubbed off on you."

Trazellie pouted at the rebuke, her face turning red. It was embarrassing to have been seen right through like that.

"I-I... ugh, sure. Whatever. I guess they did. Kill me."

Seeing Trazellie snap from being a crybaby to a defensive mother-to-be reciting mangled quotes from her allies brought a small chuckle out of Eodumia. It was a far better state than she had been previously.

"...For what it's worth, I'm glad to see the child have a home. Free from the streets of Ul'dah."

Eodumia said softly, looking down at Trazellie and, much to Trazellie's surprise, patting her head softly.

"Thank you, Trazellie."

Eodumia...? Thanking me? Have the seven hells froze over?

Trazellie initially didn't know how to respond to the genuine gratitude from Eo, in favor of just trying to stammer out some sort of witty response. But she kept silent instead, just as the two preferred, simply nodding her head as Eo moved her hand from her head to her shoulder.

Trazellie closed eyes and appreciated the moment in its entirety, fully aware of how fleeting and brief the tenderness would be.

"No quip? My, the child really has changed you."

"I just don't want this to end. I've missed you."

Trazellie could feel Eo's hand squeeze her shoulder ever so slightly at her response. Something told her Eo didn't want it to end either, as if the two of them sat in defiance of the passing of time.

"It's only a goodbye if you let it be. After all... You still have Tataru to talk to. I imagine she's been worried sick."

The idea of a fretting Tataru was a somber one indeed. Trazellie, however, wasn't fearful of what the day would bring tomorrow. For once, Trazellie felt hope again. She felt... Powerful. Proud. Just as they stood to battle with her in the face of great evil, her friends stood by her to face the demons and insecurities. Perhaps she never truly stopped being a Warrior of Light indeed, focusing on fighting a war only she could fight instead. As the moonlight hit Trazellie's face, for a brief moment, Trazellie's hair seemed to reflect the moon itself, a statement of her resolve.

"Then I'll just have to stop crying and set her heart at ease."

Eodumia smiled warmly at her friend's renewed resolve. To see the blue return to her eyes and the glow embrace her was like reuniting with a friend long since gone away. Perhaps, if all it took to see her friend return was to listen to mangled paraphrasings of philosophical musings and another one of many teary eyed vent sessions both present and future, then nothing was too costly of a sacrifice. It was time well spent.

"I won't be counting on you drying your eyes anytime soon," Eodumia said, taking a somber moment to stand up on her feet. The night drew long, and while the pleasantries were too heartwarming to say goodbye, all good things eventually would come to an end. But it would be far from the last time the two would talk like this, this the two women silently understood.

"..at the very least, however, I know you'll be able to dry her own."

Hearing the sound of Eo's footsteps growing more and more distant was heartrending, but she knew she couldn't give up faith yet. After all, what kind of Warrior of Light would she be to the child if she did?

"I'll do my damndest."

"...As you always have before. Take care, Trazellie."



The sun shined brightly on the realm once again, and Trazellie, with renewed vim and vigor, was keen on wasting not a single moment of daylight stuck in her thoughts. Before the sun began to climb up the sky, Trazellie launched herself out of her bed into Shirogane and spent little time deliberating with herself in regards to her trip to Mor Dhona. Time waited for nobody, and Trazellie already kept Tataru waiting enough. And so, with Tataru's face fresh in her mind, she brushed her bed head straight, and Eodumia's encouragement in her mind, she put together an indigo yukata adorned with butterfly decals and made her way out the door with a simple teleportation spell.

As she felt her body twist with the displacement, the scent of industry soon filled Trazellie's nostrils, and beforelong, she found herself standing right in Revenant's Toll, standing right in front of the aetheryte. With hardly a moment to get her bearings, she turned straight around and dashed towards the Rising Stones, her heart pounding faster and faster with anticipation.

Here we go. You've got this. It's going to work out. It's going to work out.

Trazellie's thoughts slowly were repeated by her breath as she opened the door to the Rising Stones, stepping past the diner scene in front of her and making her way down the halls. As she

grew closer and closer to the former Scion base, she could hardly contain her bottled energy, her body shivering with anxious anticipation.

"*Calm down. Calm down, Trazellie.*" She whispered to herself, still finding it slightly mortifying that even after all of these years, the mere idea of having a one on one with Tataru made her heart pound against her chest like a prisoner scorned. Nonetheless, she kept her stride, and as she slowly approached the foyer, she closed her eyes and stepped forward courageously, her heart and emotions on full display with a proclamation.

"Tataru... I... I need to talk to you! It's important!"

"Tataru? Just missed her. Left a little bit ago."

A very un-Tataru like voice ripped Trazellie's open, her silver eyes now focusing on a perplexed Wiebke and Leonidas, none of whom were a pink haired Lalafell.

What? Tataru isn't here?

"Wh-what the hell are you two doing here...?"

Leonidas cocked an eyebrow at the lalafell and her exasperated remark.

"Can't I just relax for once? It's exhausting looking for a challenge."

Wiebke, however, simply chuckled at her friend's clear panic.

"Leonidas and I had the same idea. Came by earlier in the day, then she told us she was heading to Thanalan and headed out."

Thanalan?

Trazellie took a deep breath in an attempt to calm her nerves again. For once, not having to talk to Tataru right away actually made her chest feel tighter with trepidation.

"Th-Thanalan? Why there?"

"If I had to guess? The Waking Sands."

Trazellie widened her eyes at Wiebke's remark, then looked over to Leonidas who shrugged back.

"Wouldn't be surprising. Never heard of a Scion that didn't go soul searching."

"You think she'd really...?"

"Maybe she's taking a page out of your book for a change."

Now that Trazellie thought about it, it didn't seem totally unusual. After all, it wasn't too long ago that Trazellie made the pilgrimage to the Copperbell Mines, or at least made an attempt to. In an era of peace such as this, Tataru perhaps would have wanted to go back to the very place she found her bearings. The very same organization that Minfilia used to touch her life and rescue her from familial irresponsibility. Truly, the two shared a lot in common, and now that the two of them had ample time to think on it, perhaps simply needed to make the same pilgrimage. The idea was somber to Trazellie, enough to close her eyes in thought.

"...Maybe you're right. I'm sorry to bother you two."

"Nah. It was pretty funny watching you strut in and make a scene like that. It was cute."

Trazellie furrowed her brows at Leo and pouted at the dark haired Miqu'te.

"C-Could you PLEASE forget that ever happened? I would be ever so grateful for that."

"Sure. After I let everyone else hear about it."

Before Trazellie could make a snappy comment towards Leonidas, Wiebke sighed at the quarrel and cleared her throat, interrupting the lalafell as she raised her voice.

"I take it you're talking to her about the child?"

The question, pointed and direct, pierced straight through Trazellie's defenses and froze her in place. Her eyes lowered slightly at the question as she nodded in response.

"...Yes. I am."

"...So, you really **are** serious about the child. Huh. To think you'd become a mother."

Wiebke looked over to Leonidas, who nodded approvingly with a chuckle.

"The baby's in good hands. Small, old lady hands. He'll definitely outgrow her within a year or two, but-"

"For the love of... First I'm too much of a potato shaped baby to be taken seriously, then now I'm some grandma in her twenties, can't I just-"

The return of the bickering brought forth a groan out of Wiebke.

"Will you two quit bickering? You keep this going, and Tataru will be gone and out of there the moment you set foot in there!"

Wiebke's admonishment silenced Trazellie almost instantly, bringing a gasp out of her.

"Oh *shit.* I gotta get going then!" Trazellie spat, practically hyperventilating as she turned tail and ran back out of the Rising Stones.

"I-I'll see you two later!!"

Leonidas let out a hearty laugh as he and Wiebke saw the tiny woman practically disappear from sight.

"She grew up fast, didn't she?"

Wiebke smiled warmly as she crossed her arms, fully happy to see Trazellie finally find the spark she desperately needed.

"Heh... She sure did." Wiebke chuckled, listening as the door clicked shut behind Trazellie.

"...Aye. I reckon I could learn from her even still."



In the melancholic silence that rested deep within The Solar of the Waking Sands, Tataru stood in silence, looking up at the empty wall that lied beyond the desk Minfilia used to gather at. She frowned at the lanterns that hung overhead, once proudly displaying Tupsimati, but only

serving to highlight its absence instead. Even though it had been many moons and seasons ago, it still felt as though not a single day went by ever since Minfilia stepped into her life and gave her another chance, saving her from a life of impoverishment and struggle. Thanks to her, she was able to meet so many new faces and people, and gained the ability to help them escape a fate similar to hers.

From talking to a mere miner to being in the frontlines of a great political revolution, life had been but a whirlwind for Tataru; ever changing, ever flowing, upending everything she came to know and would know. And yet, in the chaos of it all, she found comfort in the presence of those that faced the storm with her. And although she lost many people that once stood by her, and she faced the threat of death a disheartening amount of times, she always found the strength to stand back up and fight back, even if she held no martial prowess. With the help of the Scions of the Seventh Dawn, her heroes and saviors, she held onto her heart and stayed the course. She owed a great deal to the Scions...as well as one other person in particular. The single person that stood above all the rest; making time for her, fighting back even as will and body broke, overcoming any and all obstacles that stood in the way. Indeed, she could not forget the face that made her heart feel lighter as her worries melt away. She could not dare forget-

"...Tataru? Are you here?"

The voice of her champion returned to her, and despite the initial jolt, she turned around to greet the silver haired lalafell with a wide smile.

"Trazellie. You really came back here."

"Of course... I've been meaning to talk to you."

Trazellie's shaky breaths indicated tension and anxiety in her voice, something Tataru had been quite used to when talking to her. She smiled warmly in an attempt to comfort her, walking closer to her and taking her stiffened, yet warm hands.

"Let's talk, then. I'm all ears."

Trazellie almost couldn't decide where to start. For all the prep she had beforehand, it did naught for her in the presence of the woman herself. She bit her lip and she looked down at the floor in thought, trying her best to form words into a sentence. Tataru's light squeezing on her hands felt so comfortable, Trazellie almost feared speaking up, afraid that she'd lose the perfect mold that held her hands close. But she had to keep going. It was too important to be complacent now.

"It's about the child, Tataru." Trazellie admitted, bringing a small giggle out of Tataru.

"Oh, I've heard about that. Hard not to. Heard you made quite a spectacle tearing through Ul'dah." Trazellie teased, giggling but then dropping the playful tone when Trazellie furrowed her brows.

"...I'm going to adopt him."

The announcement brought an astonished silence to the room.

"Oh."

Tataru's response was brutally simple, and yet, so confusing for Trazellie to parse. It was neither angry nor sad, speaking instead of surprise. She knew not of what would come next, but she stepped forward and held Tataru's hands tightly, scared of having them slip away.

"I can't let Ul'dah trample another kid. I can't just...turn away and pray someone else steps in. S-So I decided to r-raise him as his adopted mother... and I'm proud of myself!"

"Then why do you sound so sad about it, dear...?"

Silence followed yet again, then was shattered by Trazellie's tried and true way of handling any problem.

"I-I'm ready to do it alone, but... I just don't..."

A look of confusion twisted Tataru's face as she tried her best to wipe Trazellie's tears.

"W-What? Who said you had to do it alone?" Tataru asked, comforting the silver haired lalafell in front of her as she tried to collect herself.

"I guess I just...? You've got your dreams. Opening a shop, becoming an artisan... Traveling the world... Wouldn't I just get in the way?"

From that question, Tataru understood the fear in Trazellie's voice fully. She took a deep breath and shook her head, admittedly rather frustrated that Trazellie would think such a thing, but trying her best to understand her perspective, even if it was one borne of wild anxiety. Trazellie was prone to these fits of irrationality, an obstacle that Tataru eventually got deft enough with handling.

"Trazellie. Come now. After all this time, why would that keep me away from you? Why would you even ask that?"

"Tataru... I... I need to be honest. And it's going to be blunt and not quite as pretty as I'd think."

Tataru rolled her eyes playfully at her champion.

"It hardly ever is, but that's what makes it endearing. You don't have to be afraid, Trazellie. Talk to me. Please."

The single "please" from Tataru took Trazellie's breath away. A simple word, and it left her winded. She squeezed her eyes shut and nodded, taking several breaths before looking back into Tataru's eyes, this time with a bright blue glow.

"I love you, Tataru. And I want to be with you. I want us to be together. I want to see your smile every day. But..."

Tataru's heart dropped at the last word.

"But...?"

"By taking in this child, I become an anchor. And your dreams have you soaring above the clouds. I love you, but if I became an anchor, I wouldn't know what to do with myself. You and your dreams mean the world to me, and if it means having you go your own way, then-"

"Trazellie. Enough. Please."

Hurt surprise flushed Trazellie's face, and her eyes dimmed a bit at the severity in Tataru's tone.

"Tataru? I..."

"...Of all of the asinine, *ridiculous* things I've ever heard... This has got to be the biggest one yet. An *anchor??* Trazellie, if I believed that *for a moment*, I would not hold your hands in mine, and not be so hurt to hear the idea so much as leave your lips!"

Trazellie swallowed nervously with a harsh grip on her hands. Regrettably, with her latent knack of frustrating people instead of hurting, she incurred Tataru's ire, and she feared for the berating that would come next.

"...I'm sorry, Tataru. I guess I really am my own worst enemy. All I do is-"

"*Overthink things? Quite so.* And every time you do it, It frustrates me, oftentimes to *tears.*"

Tataru huffed, her face flushed with frustration. "...And do you want to know *why*, Trazellie? It's because you are making the mistake of implying that I'm here with you out of some sort of gain, when I'm here because I *want* to be. I **want** to be with you."

Those five final words broke the dam holding tears in Trazellie's eyes.

"You...?"

"Yes. Child or not. I mean what I said. In fact..."

Tataru turned back towards Minfilia's desk, with Trazellie's hand still locked around hers.

"Trazellie. Come here for a moment."

Trazellie sniffled as she followed Tataru wordlessly, going back behind desk towards the empty wall. She couldn't help but feel a bit of remorse seeing a room once so filled with life and

importance become a mere gravestone for the past, with the ghost of Minfilia's memory haunting her. But when Tataru led her back to the wall, the two of them looked up at the absence of Tupsimati and reflected. It was strange; the shards of the staff seemed to be so far distant from their lives when they were around it back then, but in its absence, it was almost like the beating heart of the room itself, now removed and scattered by the winds.

"Remember what I told you about my upbringing?" Tataru asked after a bit of silence, looking at a thoughtful Trazellie as she nodded.

"Yeah. Your father made some pretty poor decisions. Forced you into debt, and then Minfilia picked you up along the way. Gave you a new lease on life."

Tataru nodded, remembering the events pleasantly in her head.

"That's right. But there's more to it than that. More to it than just merely being forced to work for a lapidary, earning barely a gil to my name. It goes without saying, but... it was tough, and it felt like I couldn't get my head out of the mud. I hardly even held twelve namedays to my name when it all came crumbling down like that. But you know... when I think back on it, despite it all... I remember it fondly."

Tataru kept her eyes trained where Tupsimati used to lie, and her eyes sparkled in the dim light with tears.

"Because before she hired me onto the Scions... I actually met her earlier. Far earlier...when she was just a miner of all things. Peddling ore, making ends meet."

Trazellie raised an eyebrow in surprise. She always assumed Minfilia had just been a natural born leader, someone who held the Echo and did great things with the power to make a difference. But here, Tataru shared a different story. One that she was sure Minfilia would have not shared under fairly normal circumstances, but now is naught but a distant memory, an unrecorded bit of history that lives only in the memory of the one person left to preserve it.

"You met her before then?"

"I did. On a whim, I showed her kindness, despite having perhaps nothing to my name to warrant it. Then...she repaid it in kind. And it made me realize something. It made me realize that, above all, I wanted to do the same. I wanted to spare someone else from that fate. To give the same kindness Minfilia gave to me, onto someone else. It was, well, my dream."

"Your...dream?"

Tataru turned towards Trazellie and took her other hand into hers, running her thumbs across her partner's hands affectionately. The callouses in Trazellie's hands were stiff and yet comforting, the mark of somebody she could rely and depend upon. Someone with whom she already did such things with, and wished to do more still.

"Yes, Trazellie. And what dream would I be fulfilling if I just let you and the child go? I'm not in this for wealth. Personal wealth is good and all, but in the end, I fight for bringing a light to a world Minfilia believed in. For those who would walk after. A world that *you're a part of*. If I just got up and walked away... What would I be? I'd just be like everyone else that wronged you. That wronged *me*. And that's not what I fought for growing up."

Tataru looked into Trazellie's eyes and smiled warmly when the light blue slowly started to shine back at her, realizing just how much she missed the vibrant hue her eyes shone within the dark. Trazellie could barely muster the strength to keep a smile up, feeling much more inclined to sob her eyes out as was usually expected of her. But she did not want to miss staring into Tataru's violet eyes for anything in the world, so with blurred eyes, she kept Tataru's in her sights, using a hand she slipped from Tataru's to hold her face steady to hers.

"I...I'm sorry I keep doubting you... Some girlfriend I am, huh? How many times has it been already...? I promised you that I'd keep honest, and yet..."

Tataru silenced Trazellie with a simple shush and a finger to her lips, winking playfully at her.

"Ah-ah, none of that now. Self pity is the start of a vicious circle, and moments like this are far from over. But..."

Bringing both hands to Trazellie's face, she kissed her delicately, to prove her convictions not just through words, but for actions too.

"I wouldn't have confessed if I didn't want to be there for them. You've carried a far heavier burden than most. And now, yet again, you have your own obstacle to clear... one only you can conquer. But... if my voice is able to help you lift your head up, then that's all I need. You aren't going to be rid of me, child or no."

For just a moment, Tataru could have sworn that the tips of Trazellie's hair illuminated with her eyes at the words, filling the dimly lit room between them with a warm light as she laughed out the rest of her tears.

"What did I do to deserve that?"

"For starters, you've been nothing short of yourself. For better or for worse. And secondly...well..."

Tataru pulled back from Trazellie and gave her another playful wink.

"Your bumbling affections were the only ones that felt honest."

Trazellie crossed her arms and pouted, embarrassed that her lover referred to her affections as "bumbling", even if it was entirely accurate.

"H-Hey. I never really...learned how to socialize in the prim and proper kind of way."

"And would you believe me if I said that alone made you feel more genuine than everyone else that passed idle flirtations towards me?"

The question flushed Trazellie's pale cheeks with brilliant red, looking far more like a tomato than the popoto everyone insisted she looked like.

"...The others were that bad, huh? I'm sure you heard plenty of terrible advances then, if mine somehow won your heart."

"Trazellie, dear. Believe me. I've gotten used to the nightlife of many cities. I've gotten used to how "business like" everything felt as time went on as I applied my trades to keep us afloat. Honeyed words may coax and soften, but they are simple just as I say it. Infatuation, drizzled with honey. No more filling than a cup of tea. No less brought about with some spirits either, might I add!"

Trazellie shared a laugh with Tataru as the two made the silent gesture to move away from Minfilia's desk, instead choosing to sit on the couch on the far end of the room. With a weight lifted from her chest, she couldn't help but give thanks to Minfilia once more, whose waking memory to this day still allowed Trazellie to overcome any obstacle that sat before her...even if the obstacle was of her own making.

"...yeah, well, thankfully, you missed my alcoholic arc. Haven't touched a lick of it since that one really lousy date in Kugane."

"Don't be daft, Trazellie. The alcohol had nothing to do with it, though it *does* make me feel better to know you've found better ways of handling your emotions. I've noticed you've definitely been teary eyed a lot more recently!"

Trazellie buried her face in her hands in embarrassment. She really *was* the easiest target of all the Scions. Nora was right.

"I promise I'll stop crying soon...eventually."

Tataru laughed and wrapped her arm around the mother-to-be, flashing an impish grin towards her.

"We'll sooner have **two** kids to worry about before your eyes dry up, dear. And that's okay. I'd sooner have you cry than never talk to me at all. After all... That's how I knew you meant something to me. When I began to miss seeing the smile that broke through the tears."

At that, what was once a playful bit of roughhousing melted into a warm cuddle, as Tataru practically molded Trazellie like clay with her arms.

"Even after everything that happened?"

"Dear. It was *because* of everything that happened that I began to miss it. Idle affections came and went, but...yours never did. Even after all that happened. From the Empire to Nabriales, when danger slithered its way into these halls, you stomped it out. When you led us through the snow going to Ishgard, you were the first to throw a blanket and a warm cup of chocolate at me right when we felt stonework underneath our feet. And when I thought you were lost after Ghimlyt...you stopped at nothing to make sure I was still holding up. One could easily say it was business, but... if it was, you wouldn't have stopped everything to check in."

Trazellie thought about it for a moment, genuinely surprised at how much Tataru remembered all of the little things Trazellie did during her tenure as the Warrior of Light. It all seemed like it had been centuries ago, and details of it all came and went after repeated battles and near death experiences. But Tataru never forgot, and just as she recorded Minfilia's story, she made sure never to forget every act of kindness Trazellie ever gave to her.

"You remembered all of that...?"

"Of course I did. And... It was what drove me forward, for all of these years. It was hard not to, when there were times where all I could do was hope that you'd come back. All of those days of waiting, unable to do anything else other than just simply pray for you to come back and make me smile again."

"I...never knew. And here I was just gallivanting around. Being oblivious."

"No, dear. You did what you had to do to protect us. And you did. Now with you resting... I don't have to wait and pray anymore. And so... that's why I came back here again. To give thanks to the ones who fought for my chance to be happy again."

Tataru pulled away from Trazellie just for a moment to reach inside her pockets, scrambling to find a scroll of a fabric Trazellie couldn't identify and brandishing it proudly. Trazellie raised an eyebrow at the lalafell as she couldn't help but giggle with excitement.

"You remember that business proposal I mentioned? About the Cieldalaes? Well, guess what? It *went through! We got the island!!*"

The news made Trazellie practically explode out of her seat, feeling a wave of excitement flush over her.

"That's great news, Tataru!! Then that means the island business is a go! When did you find this out?"

"Just yesterday... but I was so giddy, I could hardly leave The Rising Stones. I-I mean, we'd have to do some basic work, but I already amassed quite a few helping hands and their families. With business in Sharlayan growing, and with plans for the Rising Stones still being on hold... This is our chance to really make something out of it. And...now..."

She looked at Trazellie for a moment before tears of her own streamed from her eyes, reexperiencing the excitement all over again... this time, with the one she devoted her heart to there with her to receive it. She hugged her tightly with a tearful laugh, practically squeezing her in half.

"It's...gonna be a chance for us to raise a kid. You and I."

The last three words filled Trazellie with a euphoria she had longed for and thought went missing. A spark between the two bloomed once more, and with nothing left to stand in the way, the two could look towards a future of their own making; a place to truly call their own.

"You and...I... Yes. I think..." Trazellie trailed off, squeezing Tataru tightly as she thought about the child once again. It was in this moment, a name finally appeared to her, like the sun shining brilliantly from behind the clouds that hid its face. A name for the child that she, and now Tataru, would claim as their own. And with a steeled resolve and the light fully returning to her face, she grinned.

"I think... Eseci and I would love that very much."



{Several Months Later}

"PUT YER BACK INTO IT, FELLAS! WE AIN'T GOT ALL BLEEDIN' DAY!"

At the end of Moraby Drydocks, a large vessel stood in the bay, poised to set sail to the Cieldalaes. The docks, which were normally rather quaint and silent with the usual affairs, was a boisterous and excited scene now, no doubt for the momentous occasion of Tataru's new venture. Not one to leave without a large social clearing, excited chattering ran up and down the Drydocks as large crates were slowly being loaded into ship by Hyur and Roegadyn alike, supplying the families and the workers for the trek over to the island and prepping for the departure. Away from the crowds was Trazellie with a white and red yukata, dressed loosely for the warm weather as she walked alongside a wobbly brown skinned Miqu'te child, whose hand wrapped loosely around Trazellie's index and middle finger as he walked.

"Come along, Eseci. Carefully. Stay with me."

"Ma? ...Buh."

Eseci Eci looked up at his mother with widened maroon eyes, sucking on his thumb as Trazellie walked along the edges of the Aetheryte crystal. He wore an incredibly loose fitting shirt that hung over his knees, resembling more of a dress than a shirt a lalafell once wore in her youth. As the mother and son walked by the floating crystal, he cooed and stopped in his tracks, reaching his small arms out towards the crystal in an attempt to touch it with weak balance. Trazellie was

quick to reach her arms out to stop the child from falling, and instead, she lifted him into her arms instead, looking into his confused eyes and smiled warmly at the silly child.

"Not yet, Eseci. But you'll grow taller than your mother yet. Both of them, in fact."

"Muh? Muuuuuuh."

"Muuuuuuh-muh, that's right."

Trazellie chuckled at the child and touched his nose lightly, eliciting a shrill giggle from the baby, and took a step towards the docks once again. She couldn't help but be amazed by how much the child had grown in the months she had him, and amazed further still at how much effort went into just getting him into a home. Having her parents step in and use their political prowess to expedite the documentation prowess, having the two sign away her apartment to her now married friends Nanatsu and Yayaraji, the Scions all putting their weight in to take care of the child and vouch for Trazellie... The effort was overwhelming just simply **thinking** about it, not to mention just trying to learn **how** to be a parent on top of it. However, as she looked into his pudgy, innocent face and saw his eyes look up at Trazellie with comfort, a warmth in her chest melted the stress and anxiety of everything away. It seemed almost criminal to wrap a face like that behind so many malms of red tape, and for a moment, she feared that she wouldn't see it again. But here he was, in her arms, with not a care in the world. And that alone made the trek worth it in Trazellie's eyes, and that alone braced her for the future that awaited her on the shores of the Cieldalaes.

"Wait till you see your new home. You'll have so many others to play with." Trazellie comforted, taking a step forward towards the docks. However, before she could get far and get lost in her thoughts, a familiar voice called out from behind her, alerting both the lalafell and the child.

"**HEY!** You're just going to leave us Scions hanging? What gives?! I thought we were your TEAM!"

Trazellie spun herself around to see the faces of two familiar carefree ruffians, one being her own protege and the second being the ever carefree Miqu'te nomad searching for a challenge.

"Heh. I knew you and Leonidas would catch up to me. Good to see you, Wiebke."

Wiebke and Leonidas walked over to the lalafell, and while Leonidas smirked at the little baby, Wiebke was far less pleased with his mother.

"*Good to see you?* You're practically sailing out of Eorzea without saying goodbye, and you say that it's *good to see us?* You're unbelievable!"

"What can I say? The kid's a handful."

Trazellie chuckled softly, setting Eseci down on the ground and helping him gain balance again as Wiebke huffed about above. Upon seeing Leonidas, Eseci squealed and shuffled over to him, bringing out a hearty laugh from Leonidas as she scooped the kid off of the ground.

"Little man! Already running about. They grow up so fast..." Leonidas admired, poking the child's stomach and making the child giggle. Wiebke took one at the child and her feisty complaints immediately came to an end as she saw the child's eyes light up with joy.

"...They sure do. You two almost look like you could be siblings."

"I wish. Althooooouugh... You think you could let me keep him, and you could just stay on your island with your sweetheart?"

Trazellie scoffed and shook her head at the incorrigible Miqu'te. After

"Not a chance. I pulled enough hairs out trying to get the paperwork together. On the off chance you would want this "old lady" to adopt you though, I'm sure Tataru wouldn't mind raising another kid~!"

As soon the words left Trazellie's mouth, Leonidas practically spat at the idea, despising the idea of being locked down on an island somewhere stuck doing menial labor. It was the very antithesis of his being, and very much so of a drag besides.

"Nah, I'm good. Somebody's gotta keep Wiebke in line, you know?"

"Is that what you and Wiebke have been up to? Hopefully it's something that's *suitable* for the ears of a child?"

"Weeeell, you see-"

Before Leonidas could continue, Wiebke loudly cleared her throat before her face notably became flushed, something Trazellie took **delightful** notes over. Whatever the two might have been up to, it was clearly enough to make the more brutish Highlander fluster about like a young academician, something ill-suited for a woman of her stature.

"Okay, *okay!* Enough of that, willya? *Good gods.*" Wiebke scowled, bringing another cheerful laugh out from the baby, which Leonidas proudly showed off.

"See? Even the baby thinks your whining is funny."

"Th-The baby would learn well to not laugh in the face of someone's misery."

"Misery? I think the only thing the baby understands about that is not getting fed on time."

As Wiebke and Leonidas quarreled like a pair of unknowing lovebirds, Trazellie took a glance back over to the Aetheryte Crystal absentmindedly, only to find that, to her surprise, Wiebke and Leonidas had not traveled alone, and if anything, brought quite the entourage.

"...Tough? Nora? And Cyldhi too?"

The trio consisting of two Immortal Flame members and one frighteningly clad knight of darkness arrived onto the scene, each with gifts in their hands. True to form, Cyldhi had been the first to speak up, expressing sarcastic annoyance as was typically her wont.

"It feels like Tough is the only one who paid attention. If not for that poindexter, you might have skedaddled over to the Ciela...whatevers without saying goodbye! What gives?"

"Well... I *do* have a child now..."

"Where is that dumpy little dollop? Don't tell me you let him wander."

"No, he's just currently in the hands of the quarreling couple."

The four of them looked over to Wiebke and Leonidas, who had still been casting fiery remarks to one another as they took turns tickling and handling the baby. Nora sighed at the two of them and shook her head in defeated amazement.

"Well, they'll get over it quickly enough. Hopefully."

"I *might* have to rescue poor Eseci, though. Don't need to have him see *that* side of parenting just yet." Trazellie mused, bringing a small chuckle from Tough, who had been remarkably in fine spirits given his position.

"Eseci Eci. The Miqu'te with a Lalafellin name. Still amuses me to this day."

"Yeah, well, I didn't have time to ask every Miqu'te I knew about their naming conventions. I was unfortunately pressed for time."

Nora cocked an eyebrow at Trazellie's remark, crossing her arms in disbelief as she tilted her head.

"Maybe if you didn't laze around and cry so damn much, you might have."

"...Okay. Did you guys come here to criticize me, or...?"

The jab, even if pointedly true, furrowed the lalafell's brows with a huff. Cyldhi took this opportunity to ruffle Trazellie's already rather messy and loose white hair, practically shaking her entire body with perhaps an unruly amount of force in a fit of jovial laughter.

"Relax, kid. We just had to make our quota for the day. Besides, we came here with housewarming gifts! And a visitor besides."

"A visitor...?"

At this question, a meek Miqo'te with cream hair and brown eyes stepped out from behind Tough Sun, wearing a stand issue Flame Private Habergeon complimented with typical iron scale pieces, appearing to be no more than a private turned budding adventurer with the tutelage of Tough Sun himself. When she appeared, Tough Sun's usually stoic face widened into a grin, and he bowed his head thoughtfully to the two as a way of introduction.

"I am not quite as versed in the matter of what gifts best suit a child, but I do know his mother well enough. Trazellie, meet Aiko Kuwari. The newest member of the Immortal Flames...inspired to follow in your footsteps."

The statement seemed so incredulous to believe, but it was perhaps for that very reason why Tough Sun brought her along in the first place. When Aiko heard her name, she practically beamed at Trazellie excitedly, taking several steps towards her and bowing graciously.

"It's nice to meet you finally, Miss... erm, *Trazellie*. You...might not remember me much, but I remember you. I was one of the adventurers you saved from the Garleans, back when we dealt with the threat of Primals."

Hearing the word "primal" took Trazellie back several years. It seemed like an eternity ago that she once stood against the Lord of Flames and resisted the tempering that followed, preparing herself only to wage war against the Garlean Empire itself. She smiled warmly at these memories as they surfaced, no matter how hazy it was all to her by now.

"Operation Archon...? Hah. That felt like so long ago. I'm surprised to hear I was inspirational to *anyone* back then."

"And still are! When Tough Sun told me about your departure... I knew I had to come say goodbye. If there's anyone who deserves a send off... it's the one who brought me here in the first place."

Trazellie didn't quite know what to say to that, which, from the look on Tough Sun's face, had been anticipated by the Roegadyn and nodded appropriately.

"If you touched the life of someone like Aiko, then you need not imagine how much of a change you'll make on the life of little Eseci. Never lose that spirit, Trazellie. Eorzea's little "champion of light.""

"I...Tough-"

"Heeey~! The gang's all here!"

It was a good thing that Leonidas and Wiebke were quick to fill the silence that was left with Tough's words, as they were the perfect stab into Trazellie's heart and any forced words might have induced a traditional dam breakage. Leonidas led the charge with a playful punch to Cyldhi and Tough's shoulders while Wiebke instead stood next to Trazellie, seemingly aware of her mentor's troubled emotional state and grinning.

"When was the last time we all gathered together like this, huh? Outside of world ending shenanigans, of course."

"Far too few and far between." Tough mused, looking over at Cyldhi who pumped her fists with excitement.

"But here we are! So quit moping!"

Just as the group began chatting excitedly to each other, Eseci slowly clambered next to Trazellie, tugging on her long sleeves and getting her to look up with dangerously moist eyes.

"Muuuh. Muh?"

Staring at the child as he slid his thumb back into his mouth and stared up at his mother in curiosity, Trazellie nodded slowly and with a faint exhale, trying her best to collect herself.

"Yes, Eseci. Muh-muh is here."

Trazellie leaned over to pick up the baby child, eliciting an excited "bah" from the child as he let himself be hoisted from the ground. This was enough to have the group practically swarm around the tiny child, staring into his amazed, beady maroon eyes. With a thumb in his mouth, he gazed around the surrounding faces with innocent fascination, latching onto Nora's face in particular. With an excited giggle, he reached for Nora with his feeble hands, as if to pet her smooth face.

"Heh. The lil' dollop likes ya, Nora." Cyldhi mused, tapping Nora's side with an elbow. The intimidating and normally nonchalant dark knight raised an eyebrow at the child, unsure of what he possibly saw in her, and yet, all the same, lowered her head towards the baby to comply with his demand. Eseci giggled again as he began to tug at her long, black furred ears gently, as if he understood even at his age how delicate they were. The gesture brought a great joy to Trazellie, both in seeing Nora getting her fair share of teasing, but also to see Eseci open up and become so trusting of the very same people that she would lay her life down for.

"Do you like my ears, little one? You have nice ears too." Nora gently spoke, rubbing a finger on the baby's diminutive ears and bringing a fit of laughter from the baby. The group all stood in silent amazement of the child and Nora's interaction, but Trazellie looked up and around, realizing that something-or someone-had been missing. Her heart sank as she looked around in the crowds, and noticed a lack of a certain Xaela, one that perhaps was the biggest impetus for her change.

"Hey. I just realized. Where's-"

"Took you long enough to notice, Traz. It's not like you."

Eodumia's voice had always been so sharp and precise when she needed to be, and yet, each time she heard it, it was the warmest bit of comfort in the cold winter of loneliness. Normally she was better prepared for it, but this time, it sent a warm shock throughout her body, bringing an awkward chuckle out as she tried to play it cool in front of everyone. And failing.

"Heh. Maybe I *have* grown senile, huh?"

"No. You're in care of a child. Perhaps I'd be harsher if you *had* been paying attention."

Eodumia stepped out from behind Trazellie, letting the enshrouding magic fade from her being and standing to Trazellie's immediate left, just beside Leonidas and Wiebke, and completing the circle of friends at last. Eseci spun his pudgy face around to stare straight at the ninja, his eyes widening in surprise at the sudden appearance of the Xaela.

"Eehh? BAH BAH!" Eseci babbled, pointing his finger at the Xaela excitedly. Eodumia crossed her eyes with a satisfied smirk at the child, as if delighted to see the child again.

"What did you mean by *that*, little sun?" Eodumia asked as Aiko excitedly clapped for the child.

"Oh! It's like he's casting a spell! Like a little mage!" Aiko cheered, bringing a cheeky eyebrow raise from Leonidas to the normally quiet Xaela.

"On Eo? Go for it, little dude. Eo *is* kind of "bah-bah" though, so you're-OW!" Leonidas wisecracked, immediately getting cut off with a powerful flick to the nose by Eodumia, who was **certainly** not having any of his sass today.

"Can it." Eodumia scolded, looking down at Trazellie and giggling at the baby with a stern nod. She narrowed her eyes at her friend, not out of critical analysis, but in remembrance, and perhaps pride of her progress, leading to a small smile to crack through.

"Are you fully prepared, Trazellie? It's going to be far different from here on out."

The question brought Trazellie into a pensive silence as she looked around at the friend group and then finally back down to Eseci, who stared back into her blue eyes. No matter how many times she could answer the question in her mind, it always seemed far more difficult to answer to other people. Not out of regret or remorse, but because she found it genuinely difficult to say goodbye to the group that practically raised her in her own right. She was no longer the bumbling Fisher-turned-Arcanist she was when she first set foot in Limsa, nor the anger and hatred filled Scholar-turned-Dark Knight that she degenerated into. She had grown up, well and truly into a mature woman. And now, she rested her mantle on Wiebke, the person who stood right alongside those who fought with her to reach this retirement.

And now, their paths were diverging, and this time, for good. She is far from the adventurer that she originally sought to become, but she still held onto her dream as it took shape in a different form. The dream of changing the world and saving people...now in the form of a small child, adopted from the dirt and sand that nearly claimed it. And while the thought of this oft made her weep and fill her with fear...this time, she didn't hesitate to nod and smile.

"I am. And I'm happy. It's scary, it's going to be a lot of work, but..." Trazellie breathed, her eyes telling a different story as tears streamed down her face. "I'm ready. It's time. I am not sure when I'll see you all again... but... try not to forget about me, yeah?"

"Muh? Nuuuuuh..."

Eseci whined as he looked at his mother's crying face, unsure of what to make of his mother's smile as the tears splashed gently on his face. He reached a hand up to her face, as if trying to bat away her tears in whatever way he could perceive it.

The answer was satisfying enough for Eodumia, who nodded her head appreciatively at the Lalafell and patted her head gently.

"...Don't worry. You'll always be our brave little spark. If the universe couldn't stop you, nothing ever will."

Trazellie could only nod at the sentiment, unsure of how to possibly respond to something like that without breaking her so-called "cool exterior." Luckily, Cyldhi stepped in for her, clearly not wanting to focus too much on the sentiment either.

"H-Hey, uh... I-I almost forgot to give little Eseci his gift! N-No need for the long faces, see?"

Cyldhi sputtered, opening up the gift box she brought with her and pulling out what appeared to be a disturbingly elongated Moogle plush, a sight so absurd it snapped Trazellie out of her melancholy almost immediately with an amused laugh.

"I...I...uh...never saw an oblong moogle before, I'll give you that." Trazellie mused, causing Cyldhi to groan in frustration.

"Okay, yeah, *look.* It's surprisingly tough to make plush toys, especially on the subject of something that we, uh, don't see often enough here in Eorzea. I...should have started smaller, but I think it came out great as a first time project! Besides it was all Tough's side anyways and not mine!"

Hearing Cyldhi throw him into the spotlight, his smile dropped and he cleared his throat sternly.

"...A good soldier faces their shortcomings head-on, Cyldhi. You would do well to remember that."

"You *literally* are the one who brought it up!!!"

Despite how utterly ridiculous the plush looked, Eseci was captured by its brilliance, gripping it tightly to his body and teeth on its ears gently, which in Cyldhi's eyes, was a sign of victory.

"S-See? Little man *loves* it. I had a *great* idea."

"That's interesting. I believe you just announced that it was *my* idea, didn't you?"

As Cyldhi and Tough traded petulant disagreements back and forth to the ire of Eodumia and Wiebke both, Nora stepped forward with a gift of her own and handed a small bouquet of flowers to Trazellie, a gorgeous arrangement of white, blue, and maroon, no doubt to celebrate the adoption of the child.

"I...am not quite sure what to give a child myself. But they say that one's eyes are a window to one's soul. Or some nonsense. I thought it prudent to remind you that even in the things we take for granted, we can always find beauty. Or...at least, that's what Wiebke told me once. I just liked the flowers, personally."

Wiebke pinched the bridge of her nose towards Nora and her delivery, both amazed and also unsurprised by Nora's lack of poetry. Trazellie, however, was very taken in by the flowers, just as Eseci was with the toy.

"They're beautiful, Nora. Thank you. And Wiebke, for waxing poetic. Never took you for a writer."

"And you never will. So cherish it."

Before Trazellie could make any small quip in return, a thunderous voice from afar called out, breaking the chatter of the group with a great roar.

"ALRIGHT, YA BLEEDIN' LANDLUBBERS, GET YER ARSES ON THE SHIP, IT'S TIME TO SET SAIL!"

The circle of friends looked at one another with a pained, and pensive expression.

"...I guess it's that time, huh?" Cyldhi remarked weakly, looking at Trazellie who nodded proudly at the group.

"...So it goes. Would you mind walking with me one last time?" Trazellie asked, looking at Eodumia in particular, who was quick to nod back.

"Of course. Let's go."

Trazellie smiled happily through teary eyes and looked down at Eseci, who placed his thumb back into his mouth thoughtfully and readjust him in her arms.

"Alright, Eseci. Time to go home."

"Huuhmuh?"

Eodumia was the first to follow beside Trazellie as she took the slow walk down to the piers, with everyone else following closely behind her. Eodumia kept a hand on Trazellie's back as they walked, taking the role of the unofficial "leader" as Trazellie looked back at the others with a nod. She stared at Aiko in particular, who, despite having known her the least, was excited to see her with them all the same.

"Well, Aiko... It was a pleasure to meet you. I would say that you have large shoes to fill, but frankly, Eseci will fill them in a matter of months, more likely." Trazellie mused, bringing a smile to Aiko's face as she bowed respectfully to her inspiration.

"She will do well. This I believe in Tough to handle well." Nora replied, looking at Tough nodded sternly.

"She is not in need of a stronger team, this I can assure. Though, she still admires you, so don't take this as a chance to rest on your laurels, now."

Leonidas smirked at the little lalafell, amused at the idea of her growing pudgy and old.

"Nah. Tataru will have her worked to the bone. She'll be out of breath with her around."

Cyldhi cackled mischievously at the idea of Trazellie swinging logs around with her little arms, the visage being admittedly quite humorous to imagine. She crawled beside Eo and leaned over to wink at Trazellie playfully.

"I wouldn't worry. I'm sure Trazellie will do the same with Tataru, just in a different way. I bet-

Eodumia was quick to silence Cyldhi and her innuendo with an elbow to her side, causing Cyldhi to slink away behind them with an exasperated yelp.

Before long, the group reached the end of the dock, and with it, the end of their final time together. Trazellie took the solemn steps up to the top while the roar from before sounded again, giving one last warning to those still who had yet to board. The smiles hung heavily on the faces who still wore them, and Trazellie held the heaviest of them all.

"...Man. It sucks to see you go." Cyldhi said quietly, staying behind as Nora stepped forward and looked up at her departing friend.

"I guess this is goodbye, then."

Trazellie smiled weakly with a bow, giving a wink of her own.

"Only if you let it be."

After the group said their solemn goodbyes, the group stepped off the docks as the stairs began to rise, and with it, the ship began to slowly peel away from the docks with a great push from below. Trazellie, who had once stood proudly on top, now hung her head low to hide her eyes as she turned away, walking back into the ship with a wave that grew weaker and weaker as she slinked further and further out of sight. It was hardly any surprise to see Trazellie crack in the last half, but for some, the reality set in that this was the last time they'd truly get to see it. For some, it was met with a smile and a bow, a proper send off to an era that could now truly come to a peaceful end for their friend. But for some others, it was perhaps a far heavier bit of change.

Eodumia was the first to turn and walk away from the docks silently as everyone watched the ship slowly leave, saying nary a word of her intentions to leave, or even wishing to have idle talk with those around her. Leonidas being the first to see her begin to leave, watching as she kept her eyes cast to the floor and her head slightly bowed as she walked.

"Hey. Leaving already?"

Eodumia paused briefly to ponder this question, looking up at the sky.

"...The rain will set in soon."

Leonidas looked up at the sky with her, finding not a single cloud in the sapphire sky that hung over the bay and nodding slowly.

"So it shall. I'll be seeing you, then."

He glanced over to Wiebke, who sat by the edge of the docks and gazed out solemnly to the sea.

He already knew her answer to the question he wished to ask, but felt it appropriate to ask anyways, in silent solidarity to his friend.

"Hey. Wiebke. You coming with?"

"I'm afraid not, Leonidas. I need a moment to be alone."

"I understand. Take it easy, then."

After hearing the expected answer, he turned around back towards Eodumia, only to find that she spared no effort in disappearing from sight. He shrugged, completely understanding of the events, and began a stride of his own, making away to La Noscean fields. As Leonidas walked off on his own, and Tough Sun, Aiko, Cyldhi, and Nora soon departed with him, leaving Wiebke by the docks alone by the docks by her own request. The silence had been somber and painful, and yet...welcome. On the edge of the pier, Wiebke wrestled with a complicated array of emotions, ones that she wasn't sure how she could put into words. She was beyond happy for her friend, but simultaneously felt empty without her guidance. It felt so strange to her to imagine a life without her in there, and now...in a single day, that was her reality. She had finally passed down the mantle and disappeared, off to live a new life of happiness in the horizon of opportunity.

A life of peace and retirement, granted to her by the memories of what Ul'dah did to Wiebke, and her desire to protect someone from a similar fate.

"You always were the better Warrior of Light. But...I won't let you down. I promise, old girl."

Wiebke closed her eyes and expected the loneliness of the sea breeze to be her only answer, but someone else called from behind, much to her surprise.

"...Remember. She walked before, to lead those who would walk after. For those she had lost, for those she could yet save. It may be the end of her story, but it's the start of yours. Don't let that go to waste."

Wiebke turned around to face the voice, but to her surprise, saw nobody around her. She stood up to glance around, wondering where the voice was coming from. When silence was all that followed, she took one last look at the ocean and nodded solemnly, taking the words as the steps needed to move on.

"I won't. Her torch will burn brightly still. This I swear of it."

"...Good. Well come, and well met, then."

As the voice disappeared again, Wiebke wiped away the last of her errant tears, walking away from the pier to catch up with the rest of her friends, unknowingly leaving the lone Xaela on the docks behind her.

"...So long, Trazellie."