

The Future Doesn't Scare Me at All

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The Future Doesn't Scare Me at All

by [Rockets](#)

Summary

Alternate title: "Scenes from the End"

A collection of short chapters, each an altered or missing scene from the 6.0 MSQ featuring my Warrior of Light, a Seeker of the Sun named Esselte Lhian.

Returning Home - Lv. 84

Chapter Notes

Esselte/Y'shtola

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

She stands at the window, looking up at the moon. At times like these, Esselte finds herself missing Ardbert. She's still around, obviously, but it's not the same; she misses being able to talk to her directly. She still catches signs of her occasionally – in the form of emotions that don't feel quite her own, usually – but it's grown rarer and rarer in the moons since they'd faced Hades together, and the last time she'd heard her actual voice was... hm, must have been when they were saying goodbye to Seto. It's strange; they're closer now than ever, but on a night like this the room they'd given her at the Annex feels altogether too quiet, too empty. She-

There's a knock at the door. Who...?

"It's me," calls Y'shtola. "Are you still awake?"

Esselte sighs, feeling some of the tension run out of her. She checks that she's decent (good enough, she decides. She'd shed her shoes and her protective robe for the night already, but she's still in her shift and shorts, and... well, it's only Y'shtola. For a long time she'd felt it necessary to look her best for everyone all the time; a holdover from when her reputation outstripped her confidence. She's more relaxed about that kind of thing these days, although she still enjoys dressing up when she has the opportunity. On consideration, though... She undoes her top button and tugs her neckline down a little. We live and hope, after all), and pads across the room to open the door.

"Ah, good," sighs Y'shtola as soon as the door swings open. "I'd hoped to catch you before you went to bed. Stand still a moment, if you please."

She stands up straight, as much good as it does her; Y'shtola has a couple of ilms on her even at her best, and she's barefoot while Y'shtola's still wearing her heels. She feels a little shiver as she looks up at Y'shtola, the combination of her height and her peremptory attitude setting her stomach aflutter.

She's never been quite sure of Y'shtola's intentions towards her. On the one hand, the other miqo'te has never once made any direct overtures; if one were to consider only the surface of their interactions, Y'shtola would appear no different from any other colleague and friend. Esselte herself had made a couple of passes at her, early on, but when Y'shtola had seemed uninterested she'd moved on. When Ysayle died, the shoulder she cried on was Y'shtola's.

That was the turning point, the moment something shifted between them and Y'shtola became inscrutable.

But on the other hand... As Y'shtola looks her up and down, her gaze briefly lingers at her hips, at her chest. It's subtle, a bare fraction of a second, and who knows what she's *actually* seeing with her aethersight, but still...

"Hmm," muses Y'shtola. "Nothing *appears* out of the ordinary..."

Esselte tilts her head, curious. "You had reason to think otherwise?"

"Merely a precautionary measure," explains Y'shtola. "You will recall how poorly things nearly turned out for you on the First, of course. Given that you were almost certainly exposed to similar, if not far greater forces during your recent battle, I thought to check how you fared." She smiles faintly. "Fortunately, from what I can see, you and your aether are looking as good as always."

Y'shtola continues rambling about aetherology, but Esselte knows a compliment when she hears one. Normally this kind of discussion with Y'shtola would hold her full attention, but in the moment she's distracted by considering Y'shtola's appearance, and so she loses track of the conversation. She's wearing the same black battle-dress she wore on the First – well, Tataru's recreation of it – and at first glance nothing seems out of the ordinary. She catches the difference in the details after some scrutiny: her neckline, too, is pulled slightly lower. She's wearing a touch of lip gloss, and- were her nails always trimmed that short?

Y'shtola's tone turns angry, and Esselte's focus is snapped back to her words. "As if Zenos gallivanting about in your body was not misfortune enough. The sheer *nerve* of that man! Your soul is not some toy for him to carelessly fling about!"

One of Esselte's ears flicks. She's not sure what expression she's wearing, but whatever Y'shtola reads in it causes her to turn suddenly apologetic. "Forgive me, that was in poor taste. I recall vividly how battered and broken your soul was in the depths of Amaurot, and I- I don't wish to see that happen to you again."

Y'shtola hugs her arms against herself, looking uncharacteristically fragile. "You were so close to coming apart completely. If you could have seen yourself- ah, but the greater part of me is glad you could not. It was... a horror beyond description."

Esselte takes a step forward, despite herself. In lieu of words she holds her hands out, and Y'shtola takes them in hers, squeezing them tight.

"Promise me," demands Y'shtola. "Promise me you will be careful. That you will seek me out if you feel at all unwell."

"Of course," says Esselte, nodding. "You've looked out for me ever since we first met, that night on the ship into Limsa. You saved me yet again when we reunited at Summerford, though you didn't even remember me at the time." She glances down at their conjoined hands, and takes a risk. "I shall ever be in your capable hands. At least, that is my hope."

Y'shtola stiffens, and for a moment Esselte is afraid she's stepped too far. But then Y'shtola smiles at her, a calculating look in her eyes. "That puts my heart at ease, if only a touch. Might I come in? These rooms are chilly at the best of times, and I suspect it will grow colder as the night wears on. I should like to ensure yours stays warm, if nothing else."

"Please," manages Esselte. She's familiar enough with this dance, but it's disorienting to be following it with Y'shtola, after all this time. Her grip is tight on the door as she opens it wide, letting Y'shtola enter. "I look forward to your expert guidance."

She swings the door shut, locking it behind her to keep the rest of the star out. Whatever else it wants of her, it can wait until the morrow.

Chapter End Notes

Ardbert trans

Worthy - Lv. 87

Chapter Summary

Esselte/Venat. Note the updated tags.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: there are some fairly severe injuries in this one, but they aren't described in much depth and they're fully healed by the end.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It stands to reason that Venat's combat prowess is the stuff of legends, given... everything. Esselte stretches her Echo premonitions to their limits and *still* she's barely keeping up with Venat, who doesn't even seem out of breath. Although it's a friendly spar for *her*, for Esselte it's an all-out fight where she's pressed harder than Hades ever managed, or Elidibus. (*Or Zenos*, supplies her treacherous mind. *You had help for the other two, remember?* Yes, thank you, Ardbert, but now isn't the time.)

It's strange, seeing Venat fight. In the flesh, as it were. Hydaleyn was always somewhat abstract; enigmatic plans overlaid with a fond smile. As the fight drags on, Esselte comes to understand that the Hydaleyn she knew was always just a glimpse of this person, of Venat. She already knew that intellectually, of course, but seeing it in person is another thing entirely. There's a gap in the Echo's whisper at one point, a surprise attack covered by a bluff so complete that even the Echo can't predict what's coming, and *still* Esselte is able to sidestep it with just her familiarity with Hydaleyn's methods.

She sees a brief hole in the pattern of Venat's attacks and plants her feet in it, drawing together the supercharged aether of this place into her staff for her counterattack. The corner of Venat's lips twitches up, and Esselte is struck with another thought.

She's beautiful.

In that *exact* moment of distraction, Venat throws out an aetherial lash and binds her to the ground. Her half-finished spell flares off into the sky, harmless.

Venat laughs melodically and begins charging an attack that is clearly going to end this fight, one way or another. "Break your chains," she calls. "Shed your burdens, and show me your strength of will!"

Esselte struggles against the binding, hardly needing the encouragement. She gets her arms free just as Venat leaps, but she doesn't have time to free her legs before the sword comes screaming down at her like a meteor. All she can do is cross her arms above her head, brace... and pray Venat doesn't accidentally kill her.

The impact is like nothing she's ever felt. There's a *crack* as her new staff, freshly acquired in Radz-at-Han, shatters into splinters. There's another pair, *crack-crack* in quick succession, and the overwhelming flood of pain informs her that Venat has just broken both her arms. She grits her teeth, screaming despite herself, and *something* is called forth from deep in her soul. It reminds her of her days training with the axe; the tempered form of a warrior's rage, that deep-seated bloody-mindedness and refusal to die through emotion alone.

The sword slows as it nears her chest, then slides off to her side like she's wearing a breastplate.

Venat says something, sounding impressed, but Esselte can't parse the words through the pain. She blacks out, with just barely enough presence of mind to not break her fall with her arms.

She awakes in an instant, going from insensate to fully aware between one moment and the next. She's lying on something soft, and Venat is standing over her, looking down in concern.

"Oh, good," breathes Venat. "I was worried I'd overdone it."

Esselte tries to reply, but all that comes out is a croak.

Venat gives her a sympathetic smile. "Can you sit? I brought juice."

She sits. There is indeed juice; Venat holds a tall glass of something thick and red to her lips. The taste reminds her of Tailfeather, for some reason. Her strength returns as she drinks it, and by the end she's holding the glass herself.

"I have to apologize," says Venat quietly. "I've sparred with Apollo so often that I just got rather caught up in the heat of things. At that moment, I forgot that you're more fragile than us."

Esselte realizes anew that she's *holding her glass herself*, which shouldn't be possible with her *arms broken*. She examines her hand, turning it this way and that, and there isn't a hint of pain.

"Yes, I fixed your arms," explains Venat. "It was the least I could do."

Esselte sets the empty glass down on the side table and sits back, resting against the pillows of the bed she's apparently in. "That trick at the end. How did you do that? I was *certain* there was an opening there, that I was safe there for some few seconds, but it was like you knew what I was thinking."

Her gaze is drawn to Venat's lips again as she quirks that same half-smile at her as before. "A test. If you truly were who you said you were, then I *did* know how you'd respond to that. Memories or not, some instincts are simply part of your personality. Suffice it to say, I'm entirely convinced."

"But... wait. Wait. You're not just talking about leaving a gap in your attacks for me to try and exploit. You mean—" Esselte blushes, suddenly feeling warm. "You *knew* you could distract me with a smile?"

Venat laughs, not unkindly. "I said I'd sparred with Apollo a lot, didn't I? She falls for that every time."

"Apollo... you mean, the current Azem? But— hang on." Esselte squints at Venat. "If you know what she's *thinking*, then that means she told you her thoughts. And, uh. What— I can't believe I'm asking this. What *exactly* is the nature of your relationship with her?"

"Ah! An excellent question. And good questions deserve honest answers." Venat smiles at her again. "We're friends."

Esselte feels her heart sink, but Venat isn't done. "We look out for each other, both emotionally and carnally. We take care of each others' needs. Sometimes what Apollo *needs* in the middle of a difficult project is a bruising fight with a friend followed by some tender care as she recovers, and it's very easy to distract her when she gets in that mood."

She *stares* at Venat, a warmth growing in her belly. "Sorry, I— Just to confirm, you're saying that you and Az— Apollo have *sex*? With *each other*?"

Venat simply nods. She's still smiling.

"And so since she's me, you predicted *I'd* be interested too?" Esselte knows she's starting to sound manic. She doesn't care.

Venat nods again. Her smile widens, like she finds this whole situation hilarious.

"*Am I getting propositioned by Hydaleyn, the will of the star?!*"

Venat grins. "If I believe the rest of your story, then I have to believe that part too, wouldn't you say? So, yes."

She slumps back into the pillows, exhausted. "How is this my life? I mean, *yes please*, obviously. There's no way I'd ever decline an offer like that. Which you knew already, because apparently even with *a different set of memories entirely*, some things never change." She pouts.

Venat cups Esselte's cheek in the palm of her hand. It feels cool against her blush. "Lest you worry, I do understand that you're two separate people. Our experiences make us, just as much as our souls do. I see you as more akin to... her inheritor. Familiar in some ways, different in others." Venat leans in, her lips grazing against Esselte's. "My brave little sun."

Esselte chokes on her tongue. Sadu laughs at her from her memories.

Chapter End Notes

I realized after the fact that the Tailfeather comment is probably somewhat mystifying, but Esselte herself is too preoccupied with other things to puzzle it out. The story, though, is:

- The trees growing outside Poiten Oikos are sykon trees. We know this because sykons are gatherables used by culinarians. From the item description, they are "a fruit known as a symbol of vitality and the lushness of nature."
 - Sykon is the Greek word for figs.
 - North of Tailfeather, there are Old World Figs growing in the wild. From their description, they are "a symbol of long life and femininity, (...) originally brought from their homeland to Eorzea by the Sharlayans."
- So the juice reminds her of Tailfeather because the Chocobo Forest smells of figs.

Intent - Lv. 87-88

Chapter Summary

On names, and faces.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Afterwards, Esselte curls up against Venat's side, tucked under her arm. They sit in companionable silence, simply enjoying the proximity of each other.

Or, Esselte tries to, anyway. But this... whole thing has stirred up old memories, and there was always something she'd wondered, a question she hadn't known how to put into words. She doesn't... *think* it's relevant for ending this latest calamity, but... she feels like if she doesn't ask now, here, in Venat's bed, she'll never get another chance.

So she feels her mouth open and hears herself say, "If I... asked you why you did something — the future you, I mean — do you think you could tell me? Or would just the asking of it cause a convergence? You did something that... that I want to have meant something, and not that you did it merely because you had to, because I asked you about it."

"-then I suggest everyone get some rest," concludes Y'shtola. "Assuming the meeting with the Forum goes as expected tomorrow, things will likely be quite busy after that. Given what we now know we're up against, we will need to be at our best in the days to come."

There's a collection of nods from the group, and then they begin to disperse. Esselte turns to go as well, but finds her elbow caught in Y'shtola's grip.

"Sselte, I would have a word with you in private," says Y'shtola quietly.

Venat shifts in position a little, giving Esselte a reassuring squeeze with her arm. "I can but speculate, of course. But knowing what I do now, I feel confident in saying that I intend to only do the things you've told me about if I have good reasons when the time comes. Becoming Hydaelyn, sundering the star — I would never do these things merely for the sake of preserving continuity. If I do them, I will have a reason. So whatever else I might have done, I believe I would have had a reason for that as well."

Esselte nods slowly. "I understand. Then... the battle at the Praetorium, the fight against van Baelsar and Lahabrea and the Ultima Weapon. That was the first time— no, it might have been the only time? That you got involved directly in one of my fights, I mean. Usually you're much more indirect, giving me the tools to deal with things instead of intervening yourself,

but when you broke the Ultima Weapon's shielding, that was... maybe the closest I'd ever felt to you. The first time I really understood you were *real*, and not just a mythical explanation for natural phenomena."

"That's not actually my name," murmurs Esselte as they walk down the hall towards her borrowed room.

Y'shtola blinks at her. "What?"

"It's Esselte," she explains, "or Ess if you want to shorten it. I'm not E tribe, so it doesn't make sense to drop it. I guess it never came up before now."

"Oh! My mistake, then." Y'shtola is silent for a moment, but Esselte *knows* what she's about to say. "Would it be too indelicate of me to ask-"

She laughs as she pulls the door ajar, holding it open for Y'shtola to enter. "No no, it's fine, Shtola. I wouldn't tell just anyone, but since it's you— well. My mother's J'lhian — she's doing fine back home, last I heard, although it's been a few winters since we last spoke — but I got disowned. It was mutual, really. I wasn't willing to do what the tribe demanded of me, and they—"

Esselte snuggles closer against Venat's side, not meeting her gaze. "So, anyroad, my point is, *afterwards*, I found something in my pack that hadn't been there before. A glowing blue potion in an incredibly ornate vial, with a handwritten label giving its name and describing its effects. *Fantasia*, it was called."

Venat takes a sharp breath, and Esselte looks up. "I'm familiar with it," explains Venat. "Bottled imagination. The power to, quite literally, give you the body of your dreams." She snorts a small laugh. "I know the woman who came up with the concept, as it happens. Deudalaphon, of the Convocation."

Esselte feels something settle inside herself. She knows the answer now, but she still has to ask. "You knew. *How?*"

"—insisted on calling me *Tia*. So it's better this way, all told."

"*Please* tell me it's not just because you remembered this conversation, remembered how I currently look."

"Ah," says Venat. She leans back against the pillows and looks up at the ceiling. "No, you're correct. It would have been more than that. Apollo was one of the very first to avail herself of Deudalaphon's new concept. She has strong opinions about her appearance, and though the two of you aren't *quite* identical, you both picked very similar bodies when given the choice. You're a bit shorter than her, and the ears and tail are endearing additions all of your own. Quite inspired, I must say."

"What-?" Esselte sits up straighter, affronted. "I was *born* with these, thank you very much! One of the few things I didn't have to change, in the end."

Venat laughs and settles her hand atop Esselte's head, between her ears. "My apologies. They *are* endearing, nevertheless. But yes, yes. I can't say for certain, of course, but if I had cause to visit you closely *regardless* then I would indeed take the opportunity to slip a flask of *Fantasia* into your bags. That way you would have it as an option, to use or not as you so chose."

Esselte shuts her eyes and lets the purr build in her chest. "Thank you, then."

Chapter End Notes

Deudalaphon, perhaps unsurprisingly, was called Aphrodite before she was raised to her current post. Her *Fantasia* concept was originally named *Philautia*, or *Self-Love*. The present name was a compromise reached after many years of arguing with the Bureau of the Architect over concerns that it might be confused with *other* types of self-love potions.

Endwalker - Lv. 90

Chapter Summary

Zenos/S Ranks

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Meteion streaks into the sky (or whatever serves as one, here in this non-place) and Esselte feels something settle in her. Peace, finally. She shuts her eyes, and somewhere deep in her soul, the final line in a long list gets checked off.

It won't last. It never does. But for a moment, just a *moment*, everything is as it should be.

Then Zenos' heeled boots clack on the non-ground behind her and all at once the exhaustion of the day hits her. The loss, the joy, the toll of those highs and lows comes crashing into her and demanding to be paid.

"Zenos," she sighs, not turning to look at him. "This is the part where you insist on a duel to the death, is it? I imagine you have a speech prepared about how I'm actually the same as you, deep down."

The list threatens to extend. She knows what the next entry will say. *Defeat Zenos*. And she will, if she has to. She knows that. But maybe, just this once...

"I- yes," answers Zenos, momentarily at a loss. "Before you were a *hero*, you were simply an *adventurer*, and-"

"No, shut up. I'm exhausted and my feet are killing me. If you're going to speechify at me then I need to sit down first." She sits, right where she is on the – what *is* this, anyway? Dynamis, she guesses? – on the ground(?) and flaps her hand at Zenos, indicating he should join her. She starts unlacing her boots.

Zenos paces over to her, pausing to tower over her for a moment. Then, despite all odds, he sits. "You seem... unimpressed."

Esselte pulls off a boot with a grunt followed by a happy sigh. Gaia had the right idea with wearing heels into battle; the trade is worth it, but that doesn't mean there isn't a cost. She wiggles her toes and starts unlacing the other boot. "Well spotted. You've never understood me, not really, and your continued insistence that you do has become intolerable. Here's the thing: yes, I enjoy a good fight sometimes. But *no*, I don't enjoy desperate, life-or-death battles with tremendous stakes on the line. That fight just now against- against what Meteion *became* was a miserable experience from start to end."

Zenos blinks and furrows his eyebrows, apparently surprised. "But-"

She cuts over him. "I had to send my friends away to keep them alive, and they're quite rightly going to be furious with me about it. I had to accept *your* help to keep up with Meteion's flight, one of the last people in the godsdamned *universe* to whom I want to owe a favor. And Meteion herself was terrified, and lonely, and *desperate*. She didn't want to be there any more than I did. It *sucked* Zenos, and that's the truth. I had a climactic battle, here at the ends of the universe. I expect it will become the stuff of legends as soon as that damned minstrel hears of it. And it wasn't any fun *at all*."

The other boot comes off and she flings it carelessly over her shoulder. "I do this because I have to. Because I'm here, because I can, because *someone* has to and I'm in a position to be that someone." She looks up at Zenos, a feral grin on her face. "But have you ever paid attention to what I do the *rest* of the time?"

Zenos looks thoroughly lost at this point. "The reports were light on details, I admit. What little they contained was... nonsensical. Weaving? Searching ancient libraries for lost tomes? *Dance*? These were not meaningful pastimes, and so I disregarded them."

Esselte laughs, affronted. "Weaving's a cutthroat profession. The markets will eat you alive if you aren't three steps ahead of them. That second trip through Gubal was fun: low stakes, interesting fights. There was a big owl that used a bunch of books to cast ancient, lost magics. And *dance*, ha! I cured an entire village of depression with dance by drawing it out into an amalgamated manifestation and then killing it. That was *practice* for today, not that I realized it at the time. Mistress Nashmeira will be *so* proud when I tell her."

She chuckles. "I enjoy fighting, oh yes. But only when it *doesn't matter*. When nobody will be hurt if I lose except myself. As *sport*. You've done me a favor, and so if you *insist* on making me repay it by killing you, then I will. But I'd rather not, all told."

Zenos looks as tired as she feels, suddenly. "Then this was all pointless," he mutters. "Leave, then. I will not stop you."

She looks at him, considering. She massages her foot as she thinks, trying to force the numbness out of her toes. "Did you ever hear the story of Seiryu and Tenzen during your travels in the East?"

"No," says Zenos simply. He's starting to go gray around the edges, she realizes. Not a good sign.

"Well. The short version is, several hundred years ago there was this big snake who lived out in Yanxia. Seiryu. He was strong, and fast, but that was all. But in the land where he was born, it so happened that serpents were revered as small gods. He was given respect and praise and deference that he had never earned. When they eventually came to fear him instead, bringing him sacrifices to keep him placated, he hadn't earned that either. When they began sending sellswords to try and slay the terrifying beast they had come to see him as, he killed each and every challenger they sent. But it was pointless, all pointless."

Zenos says nothing. But he is watching her, and the color has stopped leaching out of him. Good enough so far.

"Then, one day, Tenzen appeared in front of him. A wandering samurai, flanked by several large beasts of his own. Yet another fortune-seeking hunter, or so Seiryu thought. But they fought, and Seiryu lost. For the first time in his life, he had lost a battle, and so as he lay down and prepared to die, all he could do was laugh." Esselte pauses. "Lest you think I'm just making a particularly pointed metaphor, this's all true, or true enough. I heard this story from Seiryu's own snaky lips, such as they are."

"But Tenzen, dear Tenzen, had a heart as deep and wide as the Ruby Sea. He sheathed his sword and held out his hand instead, saying 'Join me. Let us begin anew.' But even a fallen kami has his pride, and Seiryu could not accept. Better to die as he was, for this life was all that he knew, and what else could he ever be?"

Esselte stands. Her stockinged feet feel weird on the un-floor, but she ignores it. "But Tenzen laughed. 'Then earn it,' he said, 'by growing stronger and using that strength to help others, as you have been helped. Become more than you are – and more than me.' Seiryu agreed, and the two of them fought many times over the years, each of them growing stronger every time. But Tenzen's life was cut short and Seiryu never had the chance to best him, in the end."

She offers Zenos her hand. "So what say you, Zenos? Do you think you can do better than a snake? In southern Dravania lies Anyx Minor, the ruins of an ancient elezen settlement. A week from now, when we're both rested, meet me there and we'll fight. Not to the death, but to the *life*. The first challenge of many to come."

Chapter End Notes

Zenos please see a therapist and take some meds to fix your chronic understimulation problem, I'm begging you

Endwalker (2) - Lv. 90

Chapter Summary

She levelled bard to 34 for raging strikes and then stopped, many years ago. So she's not a Travelling Minstrel, but she tries.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Furi isn't waiting at the entrance to the tunnel leading inside Hells' Lid. Esselte supposes it shouldn't be that surprising; after all, Reisen Temple no longer has need of outside assistance, and the auspices prefer to not have their home disturbed by unknown and uninvited guests. Of course she's traversed the caverns often enough to find her own way to the temple, but she's still caught off guard by the change. On consideration, she decides that it's a good thing, overall: it's a reminder that the star continues to revolve even when she's not there. Some days she really needs that reminder. She's not responsible for the entirety of the star. People, generally, get along fine without her.

It's Suzaku who spots her first, rushing across the courtyard to meet her at the temple's gate. "Esselte! What a welcome surprise! What brings you here today? Is there some new trouble?"

She feels a pang of regret at that. "No trouble. I'm sorry I haven't visited more often. I've been busy with other things, though that's more a reason than an excuse, you understand." She smiles. "It's good to see you, Suzaku."

Suzaku brightens up – quite literally, her plumage shading into a hotter orange-yellow – and makes a quick duck of her head. "And you, Esselte! I must admit to having felt a little jealous of Byakko and Genbu; the former spoke warmly of his meeting with you during his short visit to Eorzea over Heavensturn, and of course Genbu and young Soroban are just recently returned from their envoyage to Sharlayan. As ocean travel is difficult for me, I feared I might not see you again for quite some time. So please, do come in!"

Esselte makes a small bow. "Thank you. Would you gather the others for me? I brought gifts for everyone."

"Of course, of course! Please make yourself at home; I will not be long." Suzaku flaps away, and Esselte makes her way into the courtyard proper.

Later, with the gifts all distributed (grooming kits for the elder auspices, food for the younger ones), Esselte curls up against Byakko's flank and clears her throat. "Well. I had one other reason for coming. I owe Seiryu a story, although of course all of you are welcome to listen."

"A story?" Seiryu gives her a curious look. "I don't recall doing anything that would indebt you in such a way."

Esselte gives him a wan smile. "The reason will become clear when I tell it, I suspect. Now, I must apologize in advance: although I've heard many stories told, I'm not myself a practiced storyteller. But I'll do my best."

Once upon a time, in a faraway land – this is how stories always began where I grew up, you understand, but in truth this *particular* story happened not so long ago, nor so very far away – there was a young man named Zenos. He was not as wise as Genbu, nor as valiant as Byakko, nor as loving as Suzaku, nor as courageous as Seiryu. But he was strong, twice as strong as any other man, and strength itself was a virtue in the land where he lived.

His bloodline alone meant that he was revered as a kami among his people – near enough to a kami, at any rate. He was given respect and praise and deference that he had never earned. When his people came to fear him instead, it was equally unearned... at least to begin with. For as he struggled to find meaning in his life, he turned his tremendous strength towards conquest and crushing those who would oppose him.

(Seiryu makes a hiss of disapproval. She gives him an understanding nod.)

But then, one day, a woman appeared before him. A mage from the deserts far to the west, flanked by several companions of her own. Yet another glory seeker coming to die fruitlessly on his blade, or so Zenos thought. But they fought, and she did not die. Later, they fought again, and she even gave him some small challenge. And then, one day, they fought a third time and Zenos lost. For the first time in his life, he had lost a battle... and it was the happiest moment of his life, for he had finally felt something besides boredom. The world still contained challenges.

("That woman was you, correct?" asks Suzaku. "Yes," says Esselte, "but this is not a story about me.")

And so, before the moment could pass, before he could fall back into the endless tedium that plagued him... Zenos ran his blade across his own throat. But he did *not* die, not quite. He wandered the world as a spirit for a time, reveling in the knowledge that the world was wider than he knew. But then, one day, he heard that his revered father had a plan to poison the woman that had beaten him. Incensed, Zenos returned to his body... and then killed his father.

("Poison is a coward's weapon," rumbles Byakko. "But I do not think he did this for reasons of honor.")

Indeed, Zenos' motives were very simple. This mage was the only challenge he knew of in the world. *He* was the only person allowed to kill her. Because, he realized, he wanted to feel that moment again. Win or lose, it was the challenge that made him feel alive. And so, with his father removed... he returned to his homeland and killed his own people.

(Genbu shakes his head sadly, stroking his fingers on what would be a mustache if Soroban had ever grown one.)

He knew that the woman would be forced to return and stop him. Events grew beyond either of their control, and so their battle was delayed, but at the end of it all... the mage remembered the story of Seiryu and Tenzen. So she sheathed her staff, and held out her hand. "Forget all this," she said. "Leave this behind and join me instead. Let us begin anew."

(There's a short hiss from Seiryu, a sharp intake of breath. "Did he...?")

Alas, Zenos was not wise, nor valiant, nor loving. And most especially, he was not courageous. He was strong and he was determined, but neither of those things are courage. Courage is the ability to step into the unknown, to carry on when your strength and determination are no longer guarantees of success. To take your life into your hands and step forward with only the hope that tomorrow will be better than today.

(Esselte's voice is wavering, but she takes a deep breath and forces herself to continue.)

That kind of courage was beyond him, it turned out. Between the certainty of battle and the uncertainty of hope, Zenos chose what he knew, even should it doom him. And this time, when he died, he did not return.

Esselte snuffles, and her vision is blurring with tears, but when she meets Seiryu's eyes her gaze is steady nevertheless. "So if you ever find yourself unable to sleep at night, uncertain how you will face the years and decades to come without someone to challenge you, without the guiding light who once inspired you... I must beg you to remember that it is your courage that has brought you this far. Not just anyone could have done what you did. So stand tall, my friend."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry if you thought Zenos was actually going to survive. I don't think things could ever have gone differently for him, but the response options before his fight were wholly lacking.

- Agree with him and justify his entire terror campaign
- Dodge the question, then fight him because he's too dangerous to let go (justifying his campaign to force you to stop him)
- Get mad and fight him (justifying his campaign to make you hate him)

There's a core theme of how killing people doesn't fix what they've done or really solve anything, how we have to try for peace and offer a better future even if we don't necessarily think it'll be accepted -- from Ysayle's pilgrimage to Zenith, to Fordola and the tempered Ananta, to the Eulmorans and Cyella, to the Garlean army and even Meteion herself. Even as far back as recruiting people like Laurentius into the Crystal

Braves! This idea that you have to try, that the times when it backfires are worth it for the successes, underpins the entire story arc all the way back to ARR.

Having *every option* with Zenos, the last time you get to make a decision in the entire story arc, be accepting his worldview and telling him that his plan worked, with no option to even *try* to talk him out of it... it undercuts *everything* that's gone before. So Esselte's doing this instead. Trying anyway, and then mourning the future that could have been.

Anyway. That's the last we'll see of Zenos here, the last of my obligation to him. Next up: women.

The Maiden, the Mother, and the Other One - Lv90+

Chapter Summary

Esselte pays a social call.

Chapter Notes

Esselte/Y'shtola.

She has three things to deal with in Dravania and Coerthas, so Esselte doesn't dally in Othard and instead teleports directly to Idyllshire once she's out of the temple grounds, and then puts her hand on the aetheryte and pops over to the Epilogue Gate. ...the Prologue Gate? She can never remember which is which. The western one, at any rate. It would be nice to check in on Slowfix and the others, but some things must come first.

Still, the weather is nice, so she elects to indulge herself and to walk the path south rather than taking faster modes of transportation.

Right, this is the thing about the Hinterlands, she thinks, pulling her flying broom out of her bags and expanding it to full size. It looks nice and then it starts tipping down with rain.

She's thoroughly soaked by the time she makes it to the cave network in the southern mountains. She hops off her broom before coming to a full stop, letting the momentum carry her forward into shelter. It's dry here, at least, so she pulls out her staff and wraps herself in a gust of heated wind. It gets her clothes mostly dry in a matter of minutes, although her toes remain irritatingly damp inside her boots.

Still. Good enough for the job at hand. She gives a passing Poroggo a wave and heads deeper into the cave, brushing out her hair with her fingers.

Matoya gives her a glance as she rounds the final corner, but then tsks and looks back to her work with a frown. "Shtola isn't here. She went up to the library, researching her new project. Go on and chase after her, then; I can't imagine you've come to borrow my crystal again, not with everything settled."

Esselte smiles, despite herself. *Never change.* "Perfect, I'm just in time then."

Matoya looks up at her again, sharply. "So you *are* here to ask something of me, after all. Out with it, then."

Esselte shakes her head, still smiling. "Nothing of the sort. I come bearing three things for you: a gift, an offer, and a formality. No requests, not this time."

Something in Matoya's glare eases, just a fraction. "Hmm. Very well. I'm in the middle of something at the moment, but I can take a break soon, if you don't mind waiting. Sit; I won't be long."

Esselte sits.

The minutes stretch on. Matoya shows no sign of stopping; she's writing something, and whatever it is, it covers pages and pages. Esselte shrugs and leaves her to it. If Matoya wants to test her sincerity, that's fine. She's earned it. She can keep herself occupied in the meantime.

She unlaces her boots and gets to work on drying off her feet before they prune further.

It takes the better part of the bell before Matoya grunts quietly and finally sets aside her papers. Esselte dried her boots, combed the tangles out of her hair, touched up her nail polish and got halfway through composing a letter of her own, but she can finish that later. So she too sets it aside, turning to pull something out of her pack instead.

"So, then. Why have you come?" grumbles Matoya.

"Master Matoya," says Esselte formally, setting a large tin on the table. "A gift, as a token of my thanks for all the help you have given me over the years. I cannot speak for the Scions, as that organization no longer formally exists, but I *personally* owe you a great debt of gratitude. Today that takes the form of tea; I heard you were fond of herbal teas, so I have brought you a tea made with Kholusian lemonettes. I thought a tea from the First might be fitting, given everything." She smiles softly.

Matoya just looks at her, like she's waiting to hear the catch. Esselte takes a deep breath and presses on.

"As I said, this is merely a token: if you ever have need of me, please don't hesitate to ask. I hope someday I will be able to return the many favors you have done me." She nods, letting a more casual tone creep into her voice. "The offer, then: would you like to have tea with me? Today? You're right that I want to spend time with Shtola, of course-" Matoya narrows her eyes at the dropped honorific. "-but I had hoped to spend some time with *you* as well, now that I have some time free of duty, time to do whatever I want. Would that be alright?"

There's a long pause, Matoya glaring at her all the while. But eventually Matoya snorts and looks away. "Tea, then. Taro Roggo! Prepare us a pot of this tea Mistress Lhian has brought us."

One of the Poroggos scurries over, snatches the tin of imported tea and vanishes into one of the back passages of the cave. Another Poroggo drags a second chair over to the table (with no small amount of effort) and Matoya climbs into it with a grunt.

"You're buttering me up. Don't bother lying to me, I can tell. I shall be very upset if you *do* ask me for another favor, after all this."

Esselte sits back with a smile. "Never fear. Would you like to hear a story while we wait for the tea to steep? I'm hardly a wordsmith, but I like to think I've gotten better at storytelling out of sheer necessity, of late."

She lands on the story of Titania, after some discussion. Of her own travels across Il Mheg, dealing with the mischievous Pixies, the pernicious Fuath, the even-handed Nu Mou, the tired Amaro. The battle in Lyhe Ghiah, and what came after. Tyr Beq and An Lad, through dreams and nightmares. The tea arrives halfway through the story and Matoya sips at hers, her only commentary being clarifications of how to spell one name or another. By the time she's done, Esselte's own tea has grown quite cold, but she drinks it anyway; it seems Taro Roggo added honey to the brew, and it soothes the pain growing in her throat after so much recent talking.

"Hmmm," says Matoya eventually. "And the third thing? The formality?" Not a word of thanks or acknowledgement, but the pinched, pained look that Esselte has always seen in her eyes has eased for the first time she's ever been aware of.

"Right. I stress that this is *not* a request: I am informing you of something you need to be told, but I'm not asking you to do anything about it one way or another." She takes a deep breath. "I find I'm getting quite serious about Shtola. We've been through a lot together, and- I don't know if it's love or not. But it's *something*, and I mean to follow where it leads. You're the closest thing she has to a parent; *that man* hardly counts."

That man being Y'rhul Nunh, of course. Y'shtola had never once spoken of him to Esselte, but she had asked around during her time in Sharlayan and from what she heard, Y'shtola's total avoidance of the topic was entirely understandable. The man was a philanderer, a drunk, and (worst of all, to Sharlayan sensibilities) a *bad researcher*, spending most of his time drunkenly chasing one skirt or another in-between putting out the occasional error-riddled paper. His claim to the title of Nunh stood unchallenged only because none of his abandoned, scattered progeny wanted anything to do with him.

Matoya grunts her agreement.

"She looks up to you a lot, you know," continues Esselte. "She would never say it, but she does. Her chosen alias in Slitherbough was- it's difficult to explain the depth of their culture around names. I can't say I fully understand it myself, but... her choice indicates a deep respect for you, almost a reverence. It might sound like self-aggrandizement, or a desire to replace you, but in context it's not that at all. She loves you, and she missed you, and... it was almost a way to keep a memory of you close to her heart. Something like that, anyway."

Matoya looks away, refusing to meet her earnest gaze.

"Anyway. My point is: as her dear mentor, you deserve to be aware of my intentions towards her. We're still working things out, but..." Esselte smiles, fond. "I have hopes for the future. I'm not asking for your blessing, or anything like that. Just. You deserve to know."

Matoya is silent for a long time. "The spineless wretches of the Forum could stand to take a cue from your example," she says at length. "You remind me of old Louisoix, the way you believe in the future with all your heart, both for public matters and private ones. Now, as Shtola would tell you, I tend to be sparing with my praise. But for what you've accomplished, for what you've done for our world, you have my respect and admiration."

Esselte *stares* at her.

Matoya snorts a laugh. "Is it that unbelievable? Well. Thank you for the tea, and for the visit. But you'd best be going." She smirks knowingly. "Stop wasting your time on this old biddy and go kiss your girlfriend."

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